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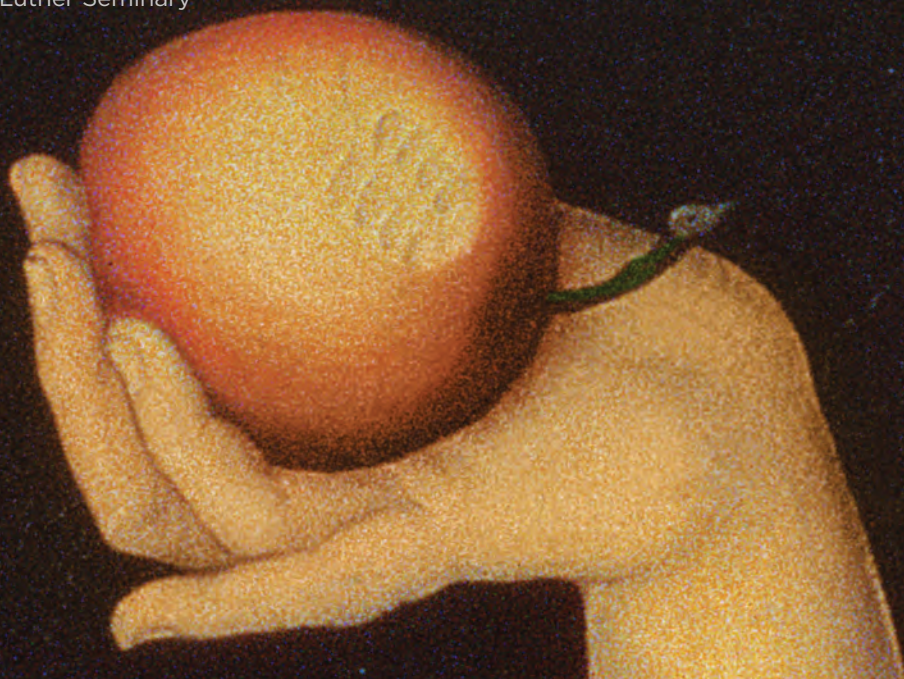
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Reading Biblical Literature

Genesis to Revelation

Course Guidebook

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Dr. Koester brings together the best in academic research with an engaging style of presentation. He is known for interweaving the study of biblical texts with their impact on art, literature, and music. A frequent presenter at conferences in the United States and Europe, he has also appeared in series for popular audiences, such as *The Life of Apostle Paul* with travel writer Rick Steves. He was interviewed on the book of Revelation on South African national television and has made professional translations of the book of Revelation for the Common English Bible.

A prolific scholar, Dr. Koester has written major commentaries on Hebrews and Revelation for Yale University Press. Among his other writings are the landmark *Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel: Meaning, Mystery, Community*; *The Word of Life: A Theology of John's Gospel*; and the popular work *Revelation and the End of All Things*, along with numerous articles and essays. He has been a scholar in residence at the

Center of Theological Inquiry and takes an active part in the Society of Biblical Literature, the Society for New Testament Studies, and the Colloquium Ioanneum. He has served as associate editor for three premier journals: *New Testament Studies*, *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, and *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*.

For The Great Courses, Dr. Koester also taught *Apocalypse: Controversies and Meaning in Western History*. He lives in St. Paul, Minnesota, with his wife, Nancy. ■

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READING BIBLICAL LITERATURE: GENESIS TO REVELATION

SCOPE:

The term *Bible* means different things to different people, but in all cases, it refers to a work that has had a profound influence on the world. Many are familiar with the Bible as a sacred text, which is read and studied because of its religious content. Others have impressions of the Bible through its cultural influence. Biblical scenes have been portrayed in art by Michelangelo and Rembrandt. The Bible's language was set to music by Bach and Handel, and its themes are woven into the novels of Dostoevsky and Faulkner.

The Bible is often regarded as a single book, but it is actually a collection of books, composed over more than 10 centuries. The Old Testament or Hebrew Scriptures, known to some as the Jewish Bible, tells the stories of ancient Israel, conveys the message of the prophets, and includes poetic texts that express joy, despair, and hope. The New Testament expands the collection to include narratives of Jesus's life, along with letters by leaders in the ancient church.

The narratives in the Bible provide an outline for this course. The Old Testament begins with narratives that tell of migration and dislocation, slavery and deliverance. The plotlines trace the tensions that arise from anticipation and disappointment, conflict and reconciliation. There are episodes involving surprise and laughter, and others that explore the tragic consequences of arrogance and jealousy. Character portrayal is a central feature. Abraham and Sarah, Moses and David prove capable of both courage and evasiveness. Tension is heightened as their flaws and failings call the future into question. God can display both mercy and outrage. At points, he is vividly present, and elsewhere, he seems inscrutable.

We will consider the Old Testament's prophetic texts within the broader narrative framework. Amos, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and other prophets make sharp indictments of social injustice and religious infidelity. Yet they also provide visions of hope for

a different future. Other writings include the psalms, which sing of the goodness of the natural world, the mystery of God, and life in community. Proverbs offers advice on how to get ahead in the world, but Job objects that one can do the right things and still suffer. Rather than offering simple answers, the different points of view draw readers more deeply into the questions.

The New Testament begins with four narratives of Jesus's life, each with its own perspective. The plotlines advance as Jesus's words and actions bring conflicting responses. Themes of suffering and service, death and life carry the action forward toward crucifixion and resurrection. The portrayal of Jesus's disciples shows them to be loyal, flawed, and deeply human. The letters then offer glimpses into the struggles and hopes of Jesus's followers in cities of the Roman Empire. Paul and other writers grapple with questions of identity and community in light of their understanding of God and the legacy of Jesus. Finally, Revelation or the Apocalypse uses evocative images to depict the conflict between God and evil, culminating in new creation. Through the interplay of perspectives from the Old and New Testaments, the Bible continues to engage readers in reflection about God and themes in human life.

THE BIBLE AS DIALOGUE



As we know, the Bible used by Christians consists of two parts. The first part, the Old Testament, is a collection of texts that are shared by both Jews and Christians. It includes passages that celebrate the grandeur of creation and others that tell of war and conflict, regulations about worship, songs of joy and despair, advice on how to get ahead in the world, and denunciations of corruption. The second part of the Bible, the New Testament, gives us narratives about Jesus and his followers, along with a group of letters, and at the end, the book called Revelation or the Apocalypse. In this course, we'll explore how readers make sense of these texts holistically.

OVERVIEW OF THE BIBLE

- ◆ The word *Bible* comes from the Greek word *biblia*, which means “books.” The Bible is a collection of books that were written and edited by different people over many centuries. Much of the Old Testament was put in written form between the 8th and 2nd centuries B.C., though some of the sources are older than that.
 - The first part of the Jewish Bible is called the Torah, a Hebrew word that means “instruction.” It consists of narratives about ancient Israel, along with the laws and customs that gave it its identity.
 - Next are the prophetic texts, which relate the message and actions of Israel’s prophets. Finally, there are other writings, including narratives, poems, and wisdom writings.
- ◆ The New Testament writings were composed by the followers of Jesus in the mid- to late 1st century A.D. The oldest writings were letters sent between individuals and congregations. Later, narratives about Jesus and his followers were composed. Eventually, some of the narratives and letters were collected and used along with the writings of the Old Testament as sacred texts within Christian communities.

- ◆ It's helpful to think of the Bible as a collection that emerged within community.
 - On the one hand, a community needs to have something that binds it together, something that creates a sense of shared identity. That bond may be formed by shared beliefs and values, along with practices that express those values. These bonds are also formed by stories that shape identity and recall the experiences that have made the community what it is.
 - On the other hand, a community includes multiple points of view. And as it continues over time, it faces the challenge of affirming what is shared, while holding in tension some points of difference.
 - These dynamics also characterize the Bible, which we might describe as a community of texts. The writings collected in the Old Testament reflect a shared belief in the God of Israel, and those in the New Testament join this to belief in Jesus. At the same time, writings in both the Old and New Testaments encompass multiple perspectives on what these shared beliefs mean and how they are to be lived out.

THE OLD TESTAMENT

- ◆ The Old Testament begins with the stories of ancient Israel. Scholars recognize that biblical narratives are based on various ancient sources that have been combined and edited over time. In their current form, these books have a sense of narrative that can be studied as literature.
- ◆ When reading a narrative, one basic question concerns plotline. A plotline is more than a simple listing of events. It has to do with the way things are connected and how one thing leads to the next. A second question concerns character portrayal, which can range from simple to complex.
- ◆ In a broad sense, the first five books of the Old Testament (Genesis through Deuteronomy) tell a story of migration. They trace the migration of Israel's early ancestors from Mesopotamia, near the Euphrates River, to the land of Canaan, at the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea. From there, they move south and west into Egypt. Major figures in the story include Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, and Jacob and his 12 sons.

- ◆ In terms of plotline, the migration from Mesopotamia to Canaan is depicted as an act of trust, as Abraham and Sarah follow where God leads them. But the plot thickens when they experience famine, conflict, and apparent disappointment. Hope continues by only a narrow thread. Abraham is portrayed as courageous at some points and indecisive at others. Sarah can be both trusting and skeptical. And their varied strengths and failings are an integral part of the story.
- ◆ The broader narrative continues as the people flourish in Egypt for many generations. But then there's a political change, and they become enslaved. Here, the plot turns to issues of oppression and the need for liberation. The dominant figure is Moses, who will lead the people into freedom. Moses is sometimes bold and sometimes fearful. His opponent is the Egyptian pharaoh, who can be both arrogant and vacillating.
- ◆ The moment of liberation is called the Exodus. It's when the people leave slavery in Egypt and begin the migration through the desert toward Canaan again. But now the people are portrayed as contentious and unfaithful. Their struggle is not against the tyranny of the pharaoh but against the harshness of life in the desert and the conflicts that threaten to tear the community apart.
- ◆ Throughout these narratives, one of the most intriguing elements is the portrayal of God. At times, God speaks clearly and graciously, but at other times, he seems inexplicable. Conflict may break out, yet God remains silent. God can show compassion for those who suffer and outrage at those who prove faithless. The varied aspects of the biblical portrayal of God are challenging, yet encountering them draws readers more deeply into the question of who God is.
- ◆ The narrative thread continues in the books of Joshua through 2 Kings. These tell of Israel's movement into the land of Canaan, where there is warfare and unrest. In time, the people establish a kingdom with its capital at Jerusalem. The most notable king is David, who helps forge a national identity. He's followed by Solomon, who builds a temple to be the country's center of worship. But unity is shattered when the kingdom is divided, and military invasions come. The northern kingdom is conquered by the Assyrians, and the southern kingdom is conquered by the Babylonians. In each case, people are taken into exile.

- Here, the narrative shows the struggle to make sense of national tragedy. The writer wants to affirm that founding the kingdom was congruent with the will of God. But that makes it difficult to understand how God could let the kingdom be destroyed and the people deported.
 - The plotline traces patterns of human disobedience that seem to bring about this devastating result, yet it also holds onto more hopeful elements. Other Old Testament books continue the story by recounting the return of some of the people to Jerusalem, where they rebuild.
- ◆ Along with the narratives, the Old Testament includes prophetic writings. A common theme in these texts is the call for a just society. Yet the prophets also have distinctive emphases, and they often convey their messages through poetic imagery.
 - ◆ The final collection of material in the Old Testament consists of psalms and wisdom writings. The psalms are songs and poems that probe the depths of despair and rise to exuberant joy. The wisdom writings ask what it means to live a good life.

THE NEW TESTAMENT

- ◆ The New Testament also begins with narratives. Here, the variety is clear at the outset. Each of the four gospels tells the story of Jesus in a distinctive way, giving us four portraits of Jesus, not just one.
- ◆ Mark's gospel is the shortest of the four; from the outset, it portrays Jesus engaged in conflict. The narrative begins when Jesus is baptized and tested by Satan in the desert. After that, Jesus announces God's kingdom, then he goes to a synagogue, where he encounters a man possessed by a demonic spirit. Jesus's first action is performing an exorcism; thus, our initial impression is that he is the agent of God confronting the forces of evil.
- ◆ Luke's gospel is rather different. It begins with angels promising a child to an elderly couple, then telling a young woman named Mary that she will give birth to Jesus. Luke speaks of Jesus being born in a barn, where he is visited



*In the New Testament, our
impressions of Jesus are
formed by the interplay
among the four gospels.*

by shepherds. Instead of starting with scenes of conflict with evil, Luke tells of Jesus being present among ordinary people.

- ◆ Matthew takes another approach. His opening lines trace Jesus's royal genealogy back through the generations of Israel. When Matthew tells of Jesus's birth, he says nothing about shepherds. Instead, he refers to wise men, who are foreigners. In Matthew's account, the wise men foreshadow the significance of Jesus for foreigners—those outside of Israel's tradition.
- ◆ Finally, John's gospel sets the story of Jesus in the context of creation. The opening lines recall how at the beginning of time, God spoke and brought the world into being. For John, that same creative word of God now becomes flesh in Jesus.
- ◆ The second main part of the New Testament consists of letters written by leaders in the early church. Many of the letters are by the Apostle Paul, and they give us a sense of the debates within the church: what the Christian faith meant and how it was to be lived out. In each case, Paul takes the questions seriously and works through them in light of his understanding of God and the significance of Jesus.
- ◆ The last book in the New Testament is called Revelation or the Apocalypse, and few books in the Bible have generated more controversy than this one. Revelation is written as a series of visions that include a great red dragon and a seven-headed beast doing battle with the allies of God.
 - Many readers assume that these visions make mysterious predictions about the end of the world. But the book's remarkable imagery seems different when you realize that it originally addressed readers living in the Roman Empire. The book offers them a way of seeing the world that is both startling and encouraging.
 - The dramatic plotline leads readers through the struggles of the present toward a more hopeful future. It culminates in a vision of New Jerusalem, where the river of life is flowing and the gates stand open to receive the nations of the world.

- ◆ As we read through the Bible, we encounter poets and prophets, visionaries and social critics. They write in different literary forms and address different contexts. For us, that's not a problem; it's an invitation. It's an invitation to explore the breadth of material within the Bible and to join in the dialogue that's created as we encounter the various perspectives it contains.

SUGGESTED READING

Alter and Kermode, eds., *The Literary Guide to the Bible*.

Drane, *Introducing the Bible*.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. The lecture describes the Bible as a collection of texts that emerged within a community. The texts reflect both shared beliefs and different perspectives. What were some examples noted in the lecture? Do you find this description helpful or unhelpful? Why?
2. People begin reading the Bible with different questions in mind. Why are you interested in reading the Bible? What positive impressions do you have of the Bible? What negative impressions do you have?

LECTURE 2

CREATION AND CHAOS IN GENESIS

In this lecture, we begin reading the Bible with Genesis, focusing on its first 11 chapters. As you may recall, Genesis is grouped with the first five books of the Bible, which are called the Pentateuch or Torah. These books contain material that originated at different times and places but, over the centuries, was put in the form we now have. With that in mind, we turn to the book called Genesis, which means “origin.” It pictures the creation of the earth, sea, and sky. And with the whole earth as the setting, it tells of particular people who travel the ancient world, looking for a place to call home. The first part of Genesis deals with beginnings.

SETTING OF GENESIS

- ◆ The first words of Genesis are “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth,” and the rest of chapter 1 pictures harmony in the natural world. We might think of this opening in terms of film. It begins with a dark screen; we see nothing, but we hear the churning waves of the ocean. After a few moments, the churning is interrupted by a voice: “Let there be light.” And an inchoate light appears. We watch as the light fades into evening and comes back in the morning, forming one day.
- ◆ A certain rhythm now develops in the “film.” The voice of God speaks again, calling for a space to be defined. We can soon see the sea below and the sky above. Then, the light fades and comes back to mark a second day. From the sea, the dry land appears. It’s rocky and barren at first, but vegetation starts to grow. And there is evening and morning—a third day.
- ◆ On the fourth day, the light is transformed into the sun, moon, and stars. On days five and six, we see the sea, sky, and land teeming with life. Along with the other creatures on land, we see human beings. They, too, have their place in the natural order.



Chapter 1 of Genesis sets up a harmony in the natural world—a rhythm of light and darkness, sea and sky, animals and humans.

- ◆ Two distinctive things are said about human beings. First, they are created in the image of God, and because of that, their relationship to the world is, in some sense, analogous to God’s relationship to the world. That is important, because the second thing we are told is that people are given “dominion” over the earth, meaning responsibility, not domination or destruction.

- ◆ This creative sequence concludes on the seventh day, when God rests. In biblical tradition, people are also to rest on the seventh day. This rest aligns human action with God's action, reflecting the harmony God intends for the world.

CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT

- ◆ A key element in chapter 2 is character development. We discern character by what the narrator says about someone and by the way the character interacts with others. Genesis 2 tells us that God formed a man from the dust of the ground, and here, the writer uses word play to show how people and the earth are connected. In Hebrew, the word for “ground” or “earth” is *adamah*, and the word for “human being” or “man” is *adam*.
- ◆ Characterization continues as God places the man in the Garden of Eden. The garden is filled with trees bearing fruit, and the way the man is to interact with this context is to “work” it and “keep” it. The well-being of the world becomes the focus of human work.
- ◆ More facets of character emerge when the narrator says that it is not good that the man is alone. Thus, God creates all the animals and birds and brings them to the man to see what he will call them. By naming the birds and animals, the man establishes relationships with them. It's a step toward overcoming human isolation.
- ◆ But having relationships with the animals is not enough. God forms a woman from one of the man's ribs. These people are now of the same flesh and bone, and they are given names to reflect that relationship. In Hebrew, the man is called *ish* and the woman is *ishah*. The connection between these words reflects the close bond between male and female. The narrator says that both are naked and not ashamed; thus, the harmony persists.

PLOT COMPLICATIONS

- ◆ When we turn to chapter 3, we can see a plot developing, centered on the disruption of harmony, whose agent is a serpent. This animal plays on the human refusal to accept limitation.

- ◆ As we know, God told the man and woman that they could eat the fruit of every tree in the garden, except one: the tree that would give them knowledge of good and evil. God warned that by eating from that tree, they would die. And that is where disruption will start, at the point where God sets a limit for human beings.
- ◆ Why would God would create such a tree, only to tell people not to touch it? Instead of answering this question, the story deals with the human desire to move beyond the limitation.
- ◆ The serpent asks if God really told them not to eat from any tree in the garden. The woman dutifully repeats God's warning—that they will die if they eat from the tree of knowledge. The serpent then creates the pivotal moment in the plot with some dangerous half-truths.
 - He says that if they eat the fruit they won't die, which is true; they won't die immediately after eating the fruit, although they will die eventually.
 - And the serpent says that they'll become like God, knowing good and evil. That's also true; they will come to know good and evil, although they will not be fully like God.
- ◆ Will the woman's action be shaped by what God said or what the serpent said? Will she respect the limitation or reach beyond it? The narrator heightens the tension by noting that the woman can already see that the fruit is "good." If she can already see what is good, then what more could she want—except to learn what is evil?
- ◆ When the woman and the man eat the fruit, their newfound knowledge brings them shame at their nakedness. The positive relationship is disrupted. When God asks what happened, the man blames the woman, while she blames the serpent.
- ◆ This disruption is reflected in the negative judgment of God. He says that the mutuality of women and men will give way to male domination, and humanity's relationship to the earth will be affected. Work will become hard labor, until people die and return to the dust from which they were taken.
- ◆ The story ends when people know the difference between good and evil. Yet God recognizes that knowing what is good does not mean doing what is good. He

assumes they'll reach beyond the limits again and take from the tree of life, to once again seize immortality for themselves. Thus, God sends them out of the garden.

- ◆ As literature, the Genesis story is set at the dawn of time, but it's designed to shape perspectives on the world as it is. It shows the contrast between the harmony God intends and the disruption human beings have created. On the one hand, God intends that people care for the earth and its creatures and that women and men be partners in that work. On the other hand, the earth and relationships within it have been damaged by human action.

NOAH AND THE FLOOD

- ◆ The narrative thus far has gone from harmony to disruption, but with the story of the flood (Gen. 6–9), Noah brings it to a point of renewal. As a favorite in children's literature, the plot of this story is usually simplified into a few major elements: God's warning to Noah, Noah's need to build an ark and gather the animals, the 40 days and nights of rain, and ultimately, the appearance of a rainbow—a sign that God will never again send a flood. In its basic outline, it's a wonderful story of deliverance and renewal.
- ◆ But when we look more closely, the story becomes troubling. It seems inexplicable that God brings about this disaster. After all, Genesis introduces God as the creator. For God to send the flood means that the creator has become the destroyer. In the simplified version, all attention centers on Noah and the animals, who ride safely in the ark. But in Genesis itself, we look outside the ark, at the people and animals who drown in the deluge. When we ask how the creator could do such a thing, there is no easy answer.
- ◆ The portrayal of God is surprisingly complex. In Genesis 6:5, the story starts with divine grief. God created the world to be good, but he sees that human beings have given in to evil. God comes to regret that he ever created humankind and decides to blot them out.
- ◆ Yet this creates a dilemma for God. Simply blotting out all life would turn the creator into the destroyer. This is where Noah plays a role.

- When God commands Noah to save the animals, we see destruction linked to renewal, preserving a thread of continuity in the narrative. Earlier, God had created life of all sorts and directed human beings to tend to the well-being of creation. This act is repeated here.
- God directs Noah to tend to the well-being of creation by building an ark, not only to save himself but to preserve and renew all the species of life on earth.

THE TOWER OF BABEL

- ◆ In chapter 11, we find the story of the Tower of Babel, which centers on the use and abuse of the power to communicate. As it begins, all people speak the same language, but how will they use the power of communication? As we saw earlier, God used words to bring forth life and harmony.
- ◆ But in the story of Babel, the power to communicate takes a negative turn. Here, people use speech to help them build a city with a tower that reaches to the heavens. In this context, the story continues the theme of human beings trying to reach beyond their appropriate limits. Their intent is arrogant—to establish a name for themselves.
- ◆ God then intervenes by disrupting their power to communicate, bringing the project to an end. Here again, the writer plays with language. He refers to the project itself as *bab-el*, meaning “gate of God” in Hebrew. But the writer comments that the project actually becomes *balal*, meaning “confusion.” Thus, the attempt to reach the gate of God disintegrates into confusion.
- ◆ Where has the plotline in Genesis 1–11 taken us? In Eden, people disrupted God’s designs; and at Babel, God has disrupted theirs.

SUGGESTED READING

Blenkinsopp, *Creation, Un-creation, Re-creation*.

Brueggemann, *Genesis*.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Stories of creation create the setting for the narratives that follow. How does the focus on creation inform the sections of Genesis considered in this lecture?
2. How is God characterized in each major section of the narrative? Which characteristics of God seem most prominent? Which are most surprising?

ABRAHAM, SARAH, AND THE PROMISE



Abraham is a figure of enormous importance for Jews, Christians, and Muslims around the world. At the center of his narrative (Gen. 12–25) is the question of promise—a commitment concerning the future. When a promise is made, it shapes expectations and actions, but it also brings risks. In the story of Abraham, the theme of promise is taken to another level. Here, the one who makes the promise is God, calling Abraham to a future filled with blessing. This promise moves Abraham to risk everything in the hope that it will be fulfilled. To explore the drama that emerges around this theme, we'll trace the connection of the promise to faith, conflict, laughter, and ordeal.

THE PROMISE AND FAITH

- ◆ At the beginning of Genesis 12, God gives Abraham his promise, which has three parts. First, Abraham is to leave his land, his extended family, and his father's house and go to the land that God will show him. Next, he is told that he will be the father of a great nation. Finally, he will be blessed and will be a source of blessing for the families of the earth.
- ◆ Each aspect of the promise creates tension in the narrative between the magnitude of the promised future and the improbability that it will ever come about.
 - Consider the theme of land. Abraham is told to leave his land and go to a place he has never seen. We may wonder why, but the text doesn't tell us. The promise doesn't even say where the new land is located, only that Abraham will know it when he sees it. The whole venture seems problematic.
 - The same is true of the promise of becoming a great nation. Abraham and his wife, Sarah, have no children, and both are growing old. If Abraham is to be part of a great nation, we might expect him to stay home, where he at least has an extended family. Yet the idea is that he and Sarah will have descendants of their own, which seems unlikely for an aging couple.

- Finally, to have land and many descendants would be considered a blessing in Abraham's culture, but the promise is that he will also be a blessing to all the families of the earth. How that could happen through an obscure traveling herder is anything but clear.
 - The surprise is that Abraham and Sarah set out. They take the risk and go to see what the future might hold.
- ◆ A gentle sense of irony enters the story here through a series of missteps on the part of Abraham. He seems to overshoot the land where God wants him to live. In the span of just a few verses, he wanders into and out of the Promised Land, then into a series of troubles in Egypt.
- In an attempt to protect himself and Sarah from the Egyptians, he tells her to say that she is his sister rather than his wife. But as soon as the Egyptians arrive, they take Sarah into the king's royal harem.
 - The Egyptians treat Abraham well, but his scheme to protect himself has put Sarah at risk. And his attempt to secure his own future actually threatens the future, because without Sarah, the promise of descendants will not be realized.
 - To get things back on track, God afflicts the king's household with plagues, which the king realizes were somehow triggered by Sarah. When he learns that Sarah is Abraham's wife, he sends her back to her husband, then sends them both out of Egypt. After this comedy of errors, they make their way back to the Promised Land.
 - This humor in the story is part of the characterization of Abraham. So often, he is remembered as an exemplar of faith, and it's clear that his willingness to step into an unknown future is a major part of the story. But at the same time, Abraham is a person who can seem woefully shortsighted. His actions create as many problems as they solve. This humorous side makes Abraham all the more engaging.

THE PROMISE AND CONFLICT

- ◆ In chapter 15, an episode takes place that heightens the tension between faith in an expansive future and realism about limits in the present. By this point in the narrative, time has passed, and Abraham still has no children of his own. God might have called him with the promise of becoming a great nation, but so far, God has not followed through.

- ◆ Abraham lets God know that he has now made out his will and has identified a household slave as his beneficiary. Given the situation, that's only realistic. God, however, does not listen to reason. Instead, he counters by raising the expectation, telling Abraham that his descendants will be as numerous as the stars of heaven.
- ◆ On the one hand, Abraham's experience calls for realism about being childless. On the other hand, there's the promise of countless descendants. Being childless calls for resignation; receiving the promise calls for hope. Which will it be? This is the point where Abraham again believes. And the narrative says that God considered his faith to be "righteousness"—the right form of relating to God.
- ◆ In chapter 16, more time has passed, and Sarah has become impatient about their lack of children. She determines to use a surrogate mother, a slave girl in the house named Hagar. Abraham goes along with the scheme, and Hagar soon gets pregnant.
- ◆ Conflict breaks out when Hagar seems to gloat that she has been able to conceive, while Sarah has not. Sarah brings up the issue with Abraham, but he simply shrugs and tells Sarah to do whatever she wants with the servant girl. Sarah mistreats her and humiliates her, until Hagar runs away into the desert, pregnant and alone.
 - God seeks out Hagar in the desert, and when he hears her story, he makes her a promise. He says that Hagar, too, despite all that has occurred, will be blessed. The child she is carrying will be a reminder of God's concern for the runaway. The child will be called Ishmael, a name that means "God listens." Through Ishmael, Hagar will be blessed with many descendants.
 - We have seen that Abraham exhibits both trust and indifference; he's both admirable and flawed. Sarah is complex, as well. Earlier, she was put at risk because of Abraham's scheme in Egypt. Now, she puts Hagar at risk through her own schemes and jealousy. It's within this context of flawed human action that God plays the positive role. It's God's compassion toward the runaway that carries the narrative forward. Divine action opens up a more promising future.



People often expect Abraham and Sarah to be models of virtue in every situation, but in the episode with Hagar, Sarah seems harsh and Abraham is unfeeling

THE PROMISE AND LAUGHTER

- ◆ Chapters 17 and 18 again take up the problem of Abraham and Sarah's childlessness. At the beginning of chapter 17, we are told that Abraham is now 99 years old and has been waiting for a child for almost 25 years. It seems audacious for God to keep repeating a promise that he has not fulfilled, yet he does so for more than half a chapter. He describes a glorious future in which Abraham's many descendants will have a home in the land of Canaan. And he now refers to this as his covenant with Abraham.
- ◆ As a sign of this covenant relationship, God says that all of Abraham's male descendants should be circumcised on the eighth day after they are born. God then concludes his statement about circumcision by saying once again that Sarah will become the mother of many nations and kings.
- ◆ At this point, Abraham simply laughs, because by now, the whole thing seems absurd. He is nearly 100 years old, and Sarah is almost 90. Abraham says that he's content now that Hagar has given birth to Ishmael and God should let well enough alone. In the face of this laughter, God finally says he will take action. In just one more year, he says, Sarah will give birth.
- ◆ The promise finally comes true in chapter 21, when Abraham and Sarah's son is born. And the theme of this section is apparent in his name: Isaac, meaning "he laughs" in Hebrew. The point is that Abraham laughed, then Sarah laughed, and now, God gets the last laugh. At Isaac's birth, Sarah says, "God has brought laughter for me. Everyone who hears will laugh with me." In the book of Genesis, God is the bringer of laughter, giving a gift that moves beyond the delays of the past to a newfound delight in the present.

THE PROMISE AND ORDEAL

- ◆ In Genesis 22, God tells Abraham to offer his son Isaac as a sacrifice. It's a story that's filled with contradictions. Up to this point, God has been the giver, but now he demands that Abraham give Isaac back as a burnt offering that would end Isaac's life. Earlier, his promise had seemed impossible; now, his demand does.



In a work called Fear and Trembling, the philosopher Søren Kierkegaard tried to probe the torment that Abraham experienced in a situation that could not be comprehended in standard categories.

- ◆ The opening line of this story says that God made this demand to test Abraham, but it offers no reason for the test. Instead, there is simply the command, which unfolds in excruciating detail. Abraham loves Isaac, yet he must put him to death.
- ◆ We would expect Abraham to object, but he says nothing. Instead, he silently takes Isaac to the mountains, carrying a knife and wood for the sacrifice. Of course, Isaac does not know the command that Abraham has been given. He innocently asks his father where they will get the lamb for the sacrifice, which Abraham tells him that God himself will provide. Is Abraham alluding to the fact that because God has given Isaac to him, he is, in a sense, providing the sacrifice? Or is he dissembling to hide the truth from his son? Or does he really think that God will spare Isaac?
- ◆ The text provides no clarity but moves on to the critical moment. Abraham holds the knife in one hand and Isaac in the other. At that instant, God intervenes; he says, “Don’t stretch out your hand against the boy.” Instead, Abraham sees a ram caught in a thicket and sacrifices it.
- ◆ What’s particularly striking about this story is the inscrutability of God’s ways. He puts Abraham in a situation that defies easy answers. For Abraham to disobey God would be wrong. But to be told to sacrifice Isaac also seems wrong; it runs counter to everything else he knows about God. Yet despite the inscrutable command, God remains true to his own character in the end. His commitment is finally for life, not death for Isaac. The story portrays a God whose ways are deeply hidden, but whose purpose is ultimately clear. His underlying commitment is the giving of life.

SUGGESTED READING

Blenkinsopp, *Abraham*.

Levenson, *Inheriting Abraham*.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Abraham is often remembered for his faith or obedience. What other traits of Abraham emerge from the narrative? What are the principal traits of Sarah and Hagar? How does each of them help move the story forward?
2. How is God portrayed in these episodes? What is God's role in moving the story forward?

JACOB, JOSEPH, AND RECONCILIATION

Two notable features of the narratives of Jacob and Joseph are disguises and dreams. Both play an important role in many kinds of literature and can serve both positive and negative ends. Dreams, in particular, often provide clues to the meaning of the story. In many contexts, dreams are seen as a means of divine communication. Some dreams are rather clear, while others are cryptic, but with interpretation, even cryptic dreams can disclose the will of God. That is the assumption in the stories of Jacob and Joseph. Together, the disguises and dreams create an interplay between concealment and disclosure, challenging us to ask where we see things clearly and where the truth might be hidden.

JACOB AS A TRICKSTER

- ◆ The trickster is a recurring figure in literature, a clever figure, who gets what he wants through deception. Jacob as trickster is introduced in the last half of Genesis 25. At this point, Abraham and Sarah's son Isaac has married a woman named Rebekah, and Rebekah has given birth to twins who are as different as night and day.
 - The first of the twins is Esau, who has a ruddy complexion and is coarse and covered with hair. He spends his life outdoors because his passion is hunting, for which his father loves him. In Isaac's eyes, Esau, the older twin, is the rightful successor as head of the household.
 - Jacob, the younger twin, loves the softer side of life. He likes to stay around the tent, making conversation by the fireside. Because he is a homebody, he is the favorite of his mother, Rebekah. She is determined to make him the privileged one.
- ◆ The critical moment in the story comes when Isaac knows he is approaching death. Nearly blind, he wants to enact a ritual blessing of the son who will become head of the household and receive a large inheritance. Isaac tells Esau

to hunt some wild game and prepare a special meal before he receives the blessing.

- ◆ Rebekah then moves into action to ensure that Jacob, her favorite son, wins out. She contrives a way to conceal Jacob's identity from the nearly blind Isaac. The old man is suspicious at first but is ultimately fooled by the disguise. He calls for God to give Jacob the special blessing and unwittingly makes Jacob the privileged one in the family.
- ◆ When Esau discovers the deception, he is livid. Rebekah sends Jacob away to stay with family elsewhere until Esau has a chance to calm down. And it's on this journey that God intrudes into the story, choosing to communicate with the morally dubious Jacob through a dream.
- ◆ As Jacob sleeps that night, he dreams of a ladder that stretches from earth to heaven, with the angels of God going up and down. Over the centuries, some readers have construed this vision as a vivid description of spiritual life: People rise spiritually by humility, which brings them closer to God, while self-obsession draws people away from God.
- ◆ Of course, the narrative tells us nothing about the meaning of the angels' movement. Instead, attention centers on what God communicates to Jacob.
 - We've seen that Jacob is a trickster, who gets what he wants through deception. In this context, he's running away from the conflict at home, which his actions have created. Yet the dream gives us a glimpse of God's purposes, which are otherwise hidden by the human flaws and failings that dominate the story.
 - In the face of human conflict, God's intent is for something greater. He will bring Jacob back to the land that he is now leaving, give him a large family, and make him a source of blessing for others.

JACOB AS A STRIVER

- ◆ In the second part of the story, Jacob arrives at the home of his mother's family at Haran (southern Turkey). Among the members of this household are two young women: Leah, the elder, and Rachel, the younger. Jacob becomes so



Many interpreters see the angels' movement up the ladder in Jacob's dream as representing humility—the goal of spiritual life—while their downward movement signifies self-obsession.

taken with Rachel that he offers to work for her father for seven years if he only will let them get married. And her father agrees—though he'll fulfill the bargain on his own terms, not Jacob's.

- ◆ When the time comes for the wedding, Jacob goes into the tent to spend the night with his bride. But his new father-in-law has slipped Leah into the tent, and in the morning, Jacob discovers that he is now married to the wrong woman. Jacob's father-in-law tells him that he will have to work for another seven years to gain Rachel for his wife.
- ◆ Jacob fulfills this commitment and, by making some shrewd moves, becomes a wealthy man. But that, in turn, generates resentment in the extended family. With jealousy and conflict rising, Jacob decides to return home, even though it means facing Esau.
- ◆ As Jacob nears his homeland, he sends messengers with gifts for Esau, but he remains afraid. We're told that he spends the night wrestling with a man, but we're not sure who that man is or why the struggle started. The encounter has a dreamlike quality, mirroring the struggles that have shaped Jacob's life.
- ◆ As the wrestling goes on, neither is winning. The mysterious man demands that Jacob let him go, but Jacob says, "I won't let you go unless you bless me." Finally, the man asks, "What is your name?" When he's told "Jacob," the man replies, "You will no longer be called Jacob. You will be called Israel, because you have striven with God and with human beings and have won." That's what the name Israel means: "one who strives with God."
- ◆ By wrestling with this mysterious man, Jacob is engaged in a deeper struggle with God himself. At the end of the story, Jacob says he's amazed that when wrestling, he saw God face to face yet survived. Note, however, that we're not told God is in the struggle until the end. Instead, we see Jacob pursuing the struggle in the hope that it will end in a blessing, which brings life.
- ◆ The next day, this surreal encounter comes to fruition in practical terms: when Jacob must face a human adversary, Esau. He must swallow his pride and bow

down as Esau approaches. And here is where the struggle culminates in a kind of blessing, as Esau embraces Jacob in reconciliation.

- ◆ Jacob links the two scenes of struggle by telling Esau that “seeing your face is like seeing the face of God.” By referring to the face of God, Jacob recalls what he said before, when his nighttime grappling with God issued into blessing. Seeing the face of God is not an abstract idea for Jacob. It is experienced in the moment of reconciliation with his brother. And in both scenes, that recognition comes through struggle.

JOSEPH AND HIS BROTHERS

- ◆ In the third part of the story, we turn to Jacob’s children, especially Joseph. The narrative is told in Genesis 37–50, and again, it asks how one discerns the purpose of God in the face of persistent human conflict.
- ◆ As the story begins, we find Jacob playing favorites among his children. It is the same pattern that sparked conflict earlier. Jacob has given his a favorite son, Joseph, a special coat, engendering resentment among his brothers. Joseph makes the problem worse by telling his brothers about dreams he’s had, in which he seems to have been put in a position of privilege.
- ◆ The brothers get their chance for revenge when they take their flocks to a pasture some distance from home. They sell Joseph into slavery to some merchants who will take him to Egypt. Joseph’s brothers disguise what they have done by covering his special coat with goat’s blood and showing it to Jacob, who concludes that his son has been killed by a wild animal.
- ◆ In Egypt, Joseph is purchased by a servant of the pharaoh and, before long, becomes an overseer. The Egyptian’s wife becomes attracted to the young slave and tries to draw him into her bedroom. Joseph refuses her advances, but she persists, grabbing the cloak he is wearing. Joseph panics and slips away, leaving his cloak in her hand.
- ◆ The woman then shows Joseph’s cloak to her husband and accuses him of making advances on her. The Egyptian is outraged and has Joseph locked up in



When Joseph's brothers sell him into slavery and convince their father that he has been killed, their deception initially works, but they will be victims of concealments yet to come.

prison. In terms of the plot, Joseph has gone from the status of a privileged son, to a slave, to a prisoner. He has reached the low point of his life.

- ◆ But here, the plot makes a decisive turn for the better, and significantly, this positive movement starts with dreams. Having gained a reputation for interpreting dreams, Joseph is summoned to the pharaoh, who has been having troubling dreams. Joseph warns that the dreams foretell poor harvests in the coming years. He advises the pharaoh to appoint overseers to set aside surplus grain during the years of good harvests to ensure a sufficient supply in

the hard years that will follow. The pharaoh appoints Joseph as the overseer of the grain supply—a remarkable rise from the status of prisoner to royal official.

THE BROTHERS' RETURN

- ◆ When the famine foretold by the pharaoh's dreams finally arrives, Egypt is well supplied with grain, but elsewhere, food is running out; in Canaan, where Joseph's family lived, the situation is desperate. To prevent starvation, his brothers travel to Egypt to buy grain. When they approach Joseph to make their request, they don't recognize him because he's dressed like an Egyptian official. Joseph takes advantage of this unintended disguise to find out whether his brothers have changed at all.
- ◆ Joseph tests his brothers in various ways, but things reach a crisis point when it appears that the youngest brother, Benjamin, will have to suffer for a crime he didn't commit. Then, one of the other brothers steps forward and says that he will serve Benjamin's punishment. At that, Joseph can no longer hide his feelings; he reveals that he is not an Egyptian official but their brother. By concealing his identity, he learns that the brothers are ready to sacrifice their own well-being for the well-being of another.
- ◆ We see again the movement from conflict to reconciliation, and the movement is completed when Joseph has the brothers bring their father, Jacob, to Egypt. Joseph uses his position to help the family settle in Egypt, where they find refuge from the famine. The story ends with a kind of symmetry: In the beginning, Joseph came to Egypt as a victim and a slave owing to his brothers' jealousy. In the end, he invites the brothers to join him in Egypt, which is now their place of safety and hope.

SUGGESTED READING

Borgman, *Genesis: The Story We Haven't Heard*.

Westermann, *Joseph*.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Which aspects of Jacob's character seem to be most positive? Which seem to be most negative? How is God's relationship with Jacob characterized in the narrative?
2. The Joseph story concludes by saying that what his brothers intended for evil, God intended for good, in order to preserve the lives of many people (Gen. 50:20). How does that shape the way we understand the story as a whole? What might be helpful or unhelpful ways for readers to relate that perspective to other situations?

MOSES AND THE DRAMA OF EXODUS

This lecture focuses on a narrative that has a defining role in the Bible: the story of Moses and the Exodus. In this story, the people of Israel are held in bondage by a harsh Egyptian pharaoh, but God sends Moses to demand their release, and eventually, they escape. Strikingly, this story both encourages and threatens. It encourages those who see themselves as oppressed, fostering a willingness to resist and generating hope for change. But it also threatens those in positions of power, undermining their sense of strength and privilege. And it includes disturbing reversals, in which the perpetrators of violence become the victims of violence. Freedom for some means a loss of control or death for others.

THE SETTING OF EXODUS

- ◆ The book of Exodus opens by recalling the migration of the family of Jacob (Israel) from the land of Canaan into Egypt that we discussed in the last lecture. After a conflict, the family had been reconciled in Egypt, where they made a good living and their numbers increased for many generations.
- ◆ But then a major political change occurs: “Now a new king, who did not know Joseph, came to power in Egypt” (Exod. 1:8). Up to this time, the rulers of Egypt had accepted the descendants of Israel, even though they were once foreigners. But the new king believes that in a war, these one-time foreigners might side with his enemies. Thus, he tries to suppress them.
- ◆ The pharaoh forces the people of Israel to work on his building projects, but even this slave labor is not enough to ease his fears. He starts a brutal campaign to control the Hebrew population, ordering that whenever Hebrew women give birth, the midwives are to kill the male children. Because the midwives revere God, they refuse to obey the king’s command.

- ◆ This introduces the basic conflict that will be worked out in the rest of the story. It is not primarily a conflict between two ethnic groups, the Israelites and Egyptians. Rather, it is a conflict between the will of the pharaoh—for oppression—and the will of God—for deliverance.

MOSES

- ◆ Exodus 2 begins with Moses's birth, then shifts to his life as an adult, where we begin to see the tensions in his character. In Exodus 2:11, he sees an Egyptian beating a Hebrew; he intervenes and ends up killing the Egyptian. One might see that as bold, but it's also clear that Moses realizes his action will come to the attention of the authorities and he must escape from Egypt to save his own life. Thus, Moses is both outraged at violence and a contributor to violence. He is both bold and fearful.
- ◆ Moses flees from Egypt to the desert regions to the east. There, he marries one of the local women and works as a shepherd. One day, he is herding his flock in the desert, when he sees a flame blaze up from a bush. He approaches the burning bush and hears a voice calling him by name. This is the encounter with God that changes the course of Moses's life. In it, God discloses his identity yet retains a cloak of mystery.
 - God first identifies himself in relational terms. He is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—the early ancestors of Israel. Thus, the God who speaks to Moses is no stranger.
 - Then, God extends that relationship from the past into the present. He's seen the misery of the people who are enslaved in Egypt and has heard them cry for help. He now intends to lead them out of slavery to a land that will become their home—the land he had promised to Abraham. This commitment to rescue the people who suffer enslavement is integral to God's character.
- ◆ Moses is hesitant and wants to know God's name; here, we find the most cryptic element in the story. God's name is more than just a label; it conveys identity. How much is God willing to disclose? He tells Moses, "I am who I am." The name seems to conceal as much as it reveals. God simply calls himself "I Am."



In artistic depictions, Moses has a face that conveys both intensity and control, but in the biblical narrative, he is a more complex human being, both bold and evasive.

- ◆ God may be the existent one who has announced that he will free the people from slavery, but his first major obstacle is Moses, who turns out to be an uncooperative prophet. As soon as God commands Moses to lead the people out of slavery, Moses objects, claiming that the people won't listen to him and that he can't speak in front of the pharaoh. Finally, God grows impatient. His intent is to free the people, yet he can't get on with it because his chosen prophet keeps making excuses. Exasperated, God tells Moses to take his brother Aaron along to help out.

THE PHARAOH

- ◆ In the third part of the narrative, the pharaoh emerges as a major figure. Here, the story subverts the iconic picture of an Egyptian ruler with absolute power. The pharaoh has pretensions to invincible power, but in his contest of wills with God, those pretensions will come undone.
- ◆ Moses goes to Egypt to meet the pharaoh and demand the release of the people from slavery. But the pharaoh commands the taskmasters to make the slaves work even harder. Moses then calls for 10 plagues or disasters to fall upon Egypt. After each plague, the pharaoh responds; the key to following the narrative is to watch how these interactions unfold.
- ◆ In Exodus 7:14, it is clear that the pharaoh is obstinate. A common English translation is that his heart remains “hardened.” Thus, Moses announces the first plague: The water of the Nile will turn to blood. With the second plague—frogs swarming out of the river—the pharaoh vacillates. He offers to let the people make a sacrifice if their God will take the frogs away. Moses does as the pharaoh asks, but when things improve, the ruler hardens his heart again. The pattern is repeated through successive plagues.
- ◆ The interaction becomes more complex with a plague of sickness and painful sores on people and livestock. In this case, the narrator says that God is the one who hardens pharaoh's heart. It's a striking comment that underscores the limits of the pharaoh's control. Not only is he losing his grip on the people, but he is losing his grip on himself. God can do what he wishes with the pharaoh's heart. And by hardening it, God keeps pharaoh engaged in the contest.

- ◆ The pattern continues through plagues of thunder and hail, locusts and darkness. The narrative relentlessly subverts the pharaoh's pretensions to absolute power and control. When the pressure mounts, he wavers and promises; when it eases up, he resists. Sometimes, he hardens his own heart; sometimes, God does it for him. The pharaoh is caught in a situation he can't control, and it will lead to the demise of his oppressive regime.

THE PASSOVER

- ◆ In chapter 11, God warns of the final plague: At midnight, he will go through the land of Egypt, and the firstborn in every Egyptian household will die, from those in the pharaoh's household to slaves and livestock. But God will spare the people of Israel. He will "pass over" the houses of the Israelites and will not harm them.
- ◆ This final plague shows a chilling circular movement in the story. At this point, the kind of violence that pharaoh tried to inflict on others comes back to strike him. At the beginning of the story, the pharaoh had ordered that all the male children born to the people of Israel were to be killed. Now, at the end of the story, the pharaoh will be the victim of the violence he once tried to inflict.
- ◆ The narrative invites us to see the story from the perspective of the Israelites, who now prepare for this moment of deliverance. This is where the tradition of the Passover comes from. The Israelites are told to slaughter one lamb for each household. They are to mark their doorposts with the lamb's blood as a sign to God to save those inside. The meat from the lamb is to be roasted and eaten with unleavened bread and bitter herbs.
- ◆ In Exodus 12, the fateful night arrives, and the plague strikes the households of Egypt. The death of the firstborn brings the pharaoh to the breaking point, and he tells Moses to take the people and leave the country. The release of the slaves shows the pharaoh's loss of authority. And that is the disturbing side of Exodus—a vivid reminder of the difficulty of change. Few of us are ready to relinquish control when we think we have it. And at the moment of letting go, we must face the limits of our own power.

- ◆ In the final part of the story, the Israelites flee, but the pharaoh changes his mind yet again and leads his army in hot pursuit. The escaping slaves come to the sea with the chariots of Egypt behind them. We sense that all hope for deliverance is about to vanish.
- ◆ But here, the narrative shifts the level of the drama. It's not primarily a conflict between the Israelites and the Egyptians but between the wills of God and the pharaoh and between their two different forms of power. To demonstrate that, deliverance is brought about by God's action.
 - Moses tells the people, "Don't be afraid. Stand your ground, and see the deliverance the Lord will bring for you today." Then he adds, "The Lord will fight for you. You have only to be still."
 - This is one of the most peculiar battle scenes in the Bible. In it, victory is not won by force of arms. The people of Israel are simply to stand their ground. What they need is a way forward, and that is what they are given.
- ◆ Moses stretches out his staff over the sea, and the water parts. The people of Israel follow the path through to the other side. The Egyptian army follows, but halfway across, their chariot wheels get clogged with mud. Moses stretches out his hand, and the water flows back to its normal place, covering the Egyptians.
- ◆ The narrative has culminated in a dramatic reversal. At the beginning, the pharaoh wanted the Hebrew children thrown into the Nile. In the end, his chariots are thrown into the sea. His efforts to keep the Israelites enslaved have failed, while God's efforts to free them have succeeded.

SUGGESTED READING

Fretheim, *Exodus*.

Langston, *Exodus through the Centuries*.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. What are the main characteristics of Moses in the story of the Exodus? What are his strengths? What are his weaknesses? What sort of a leader is he?
2. What are the main characteristics of God in the Exodus narrative? What do you find most compelling? What do you find most disturbing? Why?

FREEDOM AND LAW AT MOUNT SINAI

The story of Israel at Mount Sinai is set, in one sense, in the desert, where the landscape is barren. But in another sense, the story is set in a complex network of relationships, both human and divine. It's a narrative in which people must come to terms with their environment, their God, and themselves. The problem that runs throughout this narrative is freedom. The backdrop is the story of the Exodus, and in the Exodus, freedom was the goal. At that time, the slaves wanted liberation, and that's what the Exodus provided. But the Mount Sinai story asks what happens next: Now that the people are free, what shape does freedom take?

THE ISSUE OF SURVIVAL

- ◆ As the story opens in Exodus 16, the Israelites who were once enslaved in Egypt have been set free. They're journeying eastward out of Egypt and have come to the Sinai Desert, where they now face the problem of survival.
- ◆ The people are "complaining" against Moses and his brother Aaron, wondering what good freedom is if they're all going to starve in the desert. Of course, it isn't the case that life was secure back when they were slaves in Egypt. Instead, the people have created a fantasy, but they are now outraged and blame Moses for taking them away from the "blessings" of slavery and bringing them into the desert.
- ◆ This creates a crisis. The people are reimagining the past, but the larger issue is how they are going to have a future. They're focused on dying, but the real question is how they are going to live. The plot advances when God opens up the future by promising to give the people bread from heaven.
 - As we read on, we learn that in the morning, everything is wet with dew. When the dew evaporates, it leaves a fine, white, flakey substance on the



Contemplating manna presents us with two different interpretations: Is it a miraculous deliverance from the sky, or a way of seeing the ordinary world with a new perspective?

ground, which comes to be called *manna*. The people find that manna tastes like wafers made with honey.

- Manna lasts only for a day, but the people gather it in the morning and eat it during the day. If they try to keep it overnight, it becomes rotten and infested with worms. The one exception is the Sabbath, when God wants people to rest. Before the Sabbath, God has people gather enough manna to last through the next day, and during the Sabbath, it doesn't spoil.
- Of course, we can see that manna has become more than a means of survival. In this narrative, it creates a paradigm for a way of life. The people will have what they need but not more than what they need. They receive the manna as a gift but cannot secure their own future by hoarding it.

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

- ◆ The second part of the story begins with a description of God's overwhelming presence on Mount Sinai. There is thunder and lightning, and the mountain is engulfed in smoke. And here, God gives the law or Torah ("instruction") to Israel.
- ◆ Before any commandments are given, there is a reminder of God's identity. He is the one who brought liberation from slavery, and this identity is essential for everything that follows. If God is the one who brings freedom, then what follows has to do with living out that freedom.
- ◆ The First Commandment tells us that the heart of freedom in this context is relationship. When God brought people out of slavery, that act of liberation expressed his commitment to them. And the appropriate response is that the people are to be committed to God. Thus, he tells them they should have no other gods before him.
- ◆ The next directive is that people are not to make images of things to worship, an extension of the idea that they are not to have other gods.
- ◆ The next commandment is not to take the name of God in vain. The idea is that God's name conveys his identity and authority; people are not to claim the authority of God for things that are untrue, manipulative, or degrading.

- ◆ Next is the commandment to remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy. The commandment creates freedom for rest, which contributes to the well-being of each individual.
- ◆ The next commandment is to honor one's father and mother. It's designed to foster respect within families and to underscore the need for people to help and support those who are older.



In the Bible, the Ten Commandments are referred to as "words," or devarim (Hebrew).

- ◆ The next commandment has traditionally been translated, “You shall not kill,” but many translations now say, “You shall not murder.” The Hebrew word used here is *ratsakh*, which is used for murder and manslaughter, not for taking someone’s life in battle or self-defense. The purpose of the command is to protect human life, and that’s consistent with freedom. It creates a safe space in which people can live and work.
- ◆ The next commandment is not to commit adultery. It assumes that engaging in sexual relationships with someone else’s spouse is not an acceptable use of freedom. The prohibition of adultery contributes to the integrity of one’s own marriage and protects the marriages of others.
- ◆ We can see a pattern emerging. The next commandment is “You shall not steal.” And the idea is that taking someone else’s possessions is not a proper use of freedom. The commandment after that is “You shall not bear false witness,” intending to protect people from false claims that will damage them.
- ◆ The final commandments turn from wrongful actions to the underlying desires that lead to such actions. They tell people not to covet their neighbor’s belongings and to restrain their desires before they lead to actions that threaten the well-being of others.
- ◆ The commandments rule out behaviors and desires that damage relationships, but they don’t give guidance about what people are to do in each situation. By ruling out idolatry, murder, theft, and so on, they create a sphere in which relationships can flourish. But they also assume that people must now discern how that flourishing can take place.

REBELLION

- ◆ In chapter 24, Moses tells the people that God is prepared to make his covenant with them. This covenant will bind them to God in the relationship outlined by the commandments. Moses conducts a ceremony in which the covenant is formally accepted.

- ◆ Moses then goes back up the mountain to receive instructions about how to build a sanctuary. But the people begin to grow restive because he is taking so long. They tell Moses's brother Aaron to make gods for them, and he fashions the image of a golden calf. This is a rejection of the covenant the people have just made.
- ◆ God's response is explosive anger. He is so outraged that he now wants to destroy these people, but Moses stops him, telling God that destroying them would violate God's own commitments. After all, God had brought them out of Egypt and was committed to their well-being. If he now slaughters them, it will run counter to his most basic reasoning. And God agrees. He changes his mind, moving from anger to restraint.
- ◆ But now, Moses moves from restraint to outrage. He marches down the mountain, shatters the two stone tablets, destroys the golden calf, and has the people who are loyal to him slaughter 3,000 of the idolaters.
- ◆ What seems striking about this story are the remarkable changes that everyone undergoes. The people go from commitment to rebellion; God goes from outrage to restraint; and Moses goes from rational negotiation to violence. The most instructive element is not in the portrayal of Moses but in the portrayal of God.
 - The narrative pictures a God who is capable of both anger and restraint. And in chapter 33, things even go a step further. Here, God's anger is still restrained but intense. He tells Moses that he'll enable the people to continue on their journey, but he won't go with them.
 - Moses reverts to his role as intercessor and asks God to reconsider. He recalls God's basic commitment to the well-being of the people, and God again relents. He reaffirms his commitment and formalizes it on two new tablets of stone, inscribed with the words of his covenant.
 - The relationships in this world are not static but dynamic. There is senseless betrayal, intense emotion, and a struggle to find a way forward. The story does not attempt to explain why the people violated their covenant commitments. Rather, it asks how things can move beyond the shattered relationship to a new beginning. In this story, divine anger threatens to close

off the future. Hope emerges with the reaffirmation of that underlying bond to which God was committed.

WORSHIP

- ◆ In the final part of the story, the covenant relationship takes shape in worship. While the people were building the golden calf, Moses was on the mountain receiving instructions about the building of a sanctuary. This tabernacle was to be a kind of tent so that it could be carried by the people on their journey through the desert.
- ◆ The narrative describes the building of this sanctuary as the people's response to God's reaffirmation of the covenant. Chapter 35 tells us that people contributed whatever they could to the project because their hearts were stirred and their spirits were willing. It's portrayed as a voluntary effort, a collective response by the people, reflecting their own renewed commitment to the covenant.
- ◆ The design of the sanctuary was to reflect the structure of relationships. It was a rectangle, divided into two parts, and its inner room was the most sacred. It was called the Holy of Holies and was where the Ark of the Covenant was kept. In considering this design, it's helpful to think about the way that space orients relationships.
 - In many Christian churches, the buildings are orientated toward the front, where there is a cross. That orientation conveys a relationship to God that is centered on Jesus, especially his death and resurrection.
 - For Muslims, the worship space is a mosque, which has a niche or *mihrab* in the front wall. That niche shows the direction toward Mecca, where Muhammad initially delivered his message and toward which people are to pray.
 - The book of Exodus describes a sanctuary in which the box containing the covenant is in the most important place, and that space was not accessible to everyone. But Exodus says that the sanctuary was in the center of the camp, with people living all around it. And when they broke camp and moved to another location, they took this tent-like sanctuary with them. This portable sanctuary reflects the idea that God was not bound to a place but to a people. What defined their relationship was not location but commitments.

SUGGESTED READING

Meyers, *Exodus*.

Miller, *The Ten Commandments*.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. In what ways do the Ten Commandments limit freedom? To what extent do they protect freedom?
2. In the book of Exodus, the golden calf exemplifies false worship and the tabernacle or tent-sanctuary is identified with true worship. How does the narrative distinguish what is acceptable from what is unacceptable worship?

ISRAEL'S WANDERING IN THE WILDERNESS

The books Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy draw on traditional materials that were written and revised a long time ago, yet in their current literary form, they give a sense of movement. Leviticus is set at Mount Sinai, where Moses and the people have gathered after their Exodus from Egypt. Numbers continues the journey from Mount Sinai through the desert. And Deuteronomy brings the story to the edge of the Promised Land. At each step, we also find dominant themes. In Leviticus, it's holiness; in Numbers, it's rebellion and rebirth; and in Deuteronomy, it's a summons to devotion.

LEVITICUS

- ◆ The book of Leviticus includes a wide variety of regulations, but the central concern is with holiness. In the first 10 chapters, attention centers on the practice of sacrifice. These opening sections concentrate on how a sacrifice should be made, but they don't address the question of why. It seems clear that sacrifices may be given to express joy or gratitude at something good that has happened in a person's life. But there is no explanation in Leviticus about why things are to be done in a particular way.
- ◆ That question continues in the chapters that follow. Leviticus tells how sacrifices are to be offered for someone's sin to be forgiven, but it never explains why sacrifices must be offered to receive forgiveness. Instead, Leviticus simply assumes that expressions of gratitude and requests for forgiveness should take tangible form.
- ◆ Leviticus 16 gives us a sense of these sacrifices. This passage deals with Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement), the one time of year that the high priest would enter the most holy inner chamber of the sanctuary. Through the sacrifice of a

bull and a goat, the priest would make atonement for his own sins and the sins of the people.

- ◆ We can think of a sacrifice as a kind of gift, and in human life, gifts play an important role—a tangible way to convey friendship or gratitude. When a relationship is damaged, giving also has a place. If a trust has been violated or something hurtful has been done, we might seek to repair the relationship by what we say and through an act of giving. Leviticus takes that idea into the realm of the holy. Through tangible gifts, Israel's relationship to God is given sacred form.

NUMBERS

- ◆ The book of Numbers gets its name because there are two points at which Moses takes a census of the people. The first census, in chapter 1, focuses on the people who came out of Egypt, the generation that's now traveling through the Sinai Desert. The second census is in chapter 26, and it lists those who were not born in Egypt but in the desert. They are the generation that will enter the Promised Land. Thus, the book takes us through the death of one generation and the birth of a new one.
- ◆ Numbers starts with a positive tone. The initial census is an inventory of military strength, and the results are impressive. Israel seems to have a large fighting force and a well-ordered way of life. With everything in place, the people are ready to go from Mount Sinai to the Promised Land of Canaan.
- ◆ In chapter 9, we see God's presence pictured as a numinous cloud that hovers over the sanctuary. When the cloud moves forward, the people are to break camp and move forward. The idea is that God is leading them. The positive tone crescendos in chapter 10, where they set out on what seems to be a triumphal march.
- ◆ Then, in chapter 11, the story takes a negative turn. Complaining and resistance characterize Israel's experience in the wilderness until chapter 25. The narrative shows how the people's own contentiousness threatens to close off their future.
 - By this point in the story, God has been providing food, in the form of manna, for quite some time. Now, in Numbers 11, they are tired of eating manna and

fantasize again about a past that never existed. They picture their former lives as slaves as a time when they feasted on fish, fruit, and vegetables.

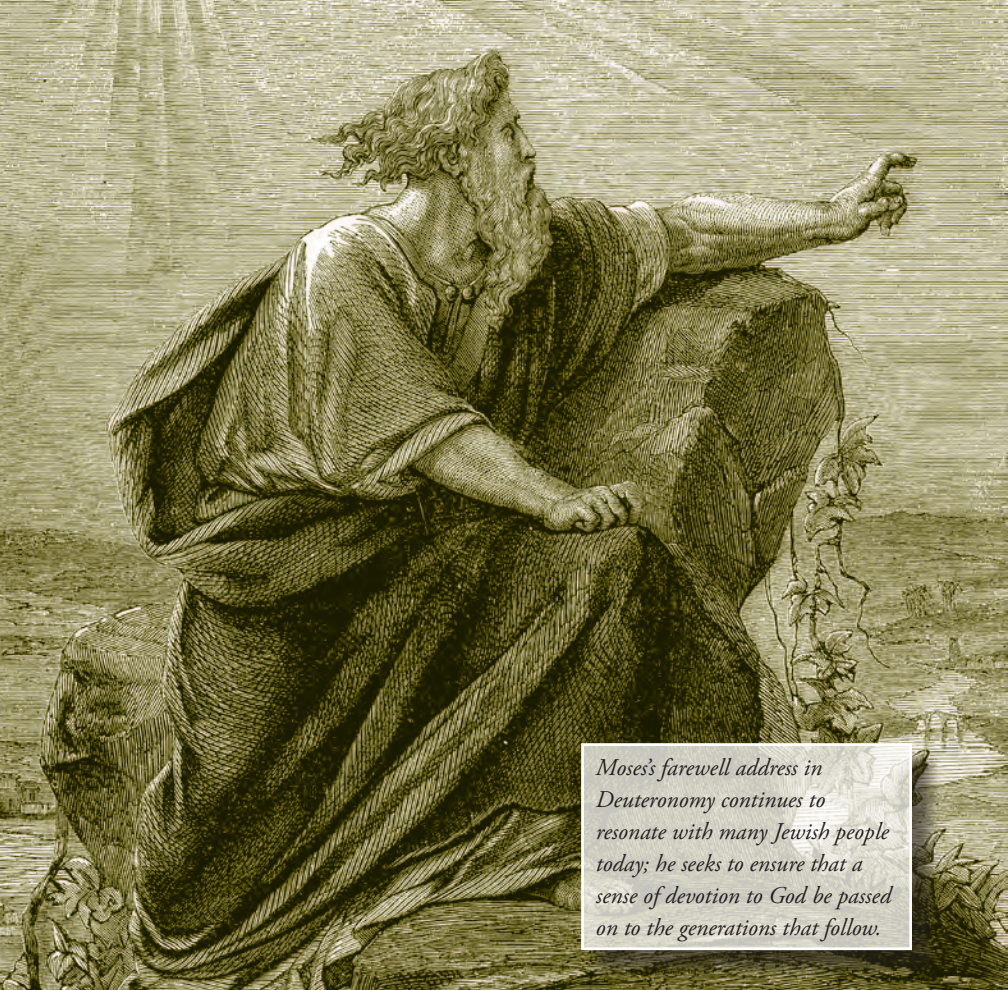
- As readers, we can see that this is fantasy, but it's generating conflict that calls the future into question. Instead of moving forward, the people are looking back, and the journey has ground to a halt. The divine response takes the form of a judgment, in which the people get what they want, and it becomes their undoing.
- ◆ In chapters 13 and 14, Moses sends spies into Canaan to bring back a report about the richness of the land. When they return, they describe the place as a land flowing with milk and honey. For those who have been traveling through the desert, it's like a dream come true. But then the spies add that other groups are living in Canaan—and everything comes apart. The people refuse to move forward. They are certain that continuing the journey into the land will end in disaster; thus, they decide to turn back to Egypt.
- ◆ It's important to read this episode within the large narrative arc, which began with Israel's Exodus from Egypt. The Exodus occurred because the people were enslaved and wanted freedom, and God gave them freedom. Then they complained about food, and God gave them manna. Now they are complaining about life in the desert, so God promises to lead them into the land of milk and honey. But they refuse to go and want to return to the land of slavery.
- ◆ In response, God must deal with his own explosive anger. He asks Moses, "How long will this people despise me? How long will they refuse to believe in me, in spite of everything I've done for them?" As readers, we're challenged to see and even feel things from God's perspective.
- ◆ As he did at Mount Sinai, Moses reminds God that God has committed himself to this people and he needs to forgive them. And remarkably, God agrees. But he adds that he will also do what the people have asked. They have said they'd rather die in the desert than move ahead to the land of Canaan. Thus, God will let them die in the desert; he will take the next generation into the Promised Land.
- ◆ This is the pivotal moment in the story. It's crucial to see the correlation between what the people ask for and what they receive. If they'd rather die in the desert,

then they can. They are rejecting the future that's being offered to them, and they're allowed to have their way. It's a moment that raises questions for the readers: What does it mean to get what you ask for? Will it actually be the future you want?

- ◆ As the narrative continues, the years pass in the desert. Eventually, there is movement forward, when the people of Israel win a military victory over a city near the south edge of Canaan. Ultimately, the narrative builds the impression that things have finally turned toward success, and it seems that the people are poised to enter the land of Canaan.
- ◆ But then the people commit apostasy by worshipping one of the local deities. From the narrator's perspective, it is one more act of rebellion against God. The implication is that if there is to be a future in the land of Canaan, it will have to happen despite the persistent unfaithfulness of the people.
- ◆ This is the point where the second census is taken (Num. 26). At the end of the census, the narrator says that none of those listed belonged to the generation that came out of Egypt. The generation that wanted to die in the wilderness has been allowed to do so. And the way is now open for the new generation to move ahead.

DEUTERONOMY

- ◆ In Deuteronomy, the people of Israel have arrived at the edge of the Promised Land, just east of the Jordan River. True to the reports of Israel's spies, the land has flowing streams and fields of wheat. For the people in the desert, the future on the other side of the Jordan River now beckons them.
- ◆ Despite this sense of anticipation, the tone of Deuteronomy is somber. The book is written in the form of Moses's farewell address to the people Israel. Like others of his generation, he will not enter the Promised Land but die in the desert. In this farewell address, he reviews what brought the people to this point, then gives the new generation directives about how to live in the time to come.
- ◆ The name *Deuteronomy* means "second law," the idea being that the book restates and elaborates the law that Israel received at Mount Sinai. The concern in Deuteronomy is that the covenant made in the past will now shape life in the



Moses's farewell address in Deuteronomy continues to resonate with many Jewish people today; he seeks to ensure that a sense of devotion to God be passed on to the generations that follow.

future. In chapter 5, Moses states the Ten Commandments for a second time and makes them the center of this book.

- ◆ The hearers are instructed to teach the commandments to their children and to explain that God gave them the commandments so that life might go well with them. The goal is the well-being of the community.

- ◆ Yet as we keep reading, we find a notable tension in Deuteronomy in the depiction of Israel's relationship to outsiders.
 - Chapter 7 tells us that God chose the people of Israel because he loved them. It was out of love and devotion that he brought Israel out of slavery. And having conveyed his love to them, God now directs them to love him in return. That makes sense.
 - But just before this in chapter 7, there is a stark reminder that for the people of Israel to possess the land, they need to drive out the people who are already living there. It's a militant passage that tells of Israel conquering the people of Canaan and showing them no mercy.
 - Then, in chapter 10, a more gracious element reappears—a reiteration of God's love for Israel and the importance of showing love for God. The text adds that God also loves outsiders. Because God loved Israel's ancestors when they were aliens, they are to do the same for the aliens in their own community.
 - In the same book, there are passages that call for wholehearted devotion toward God and harsh tactics against other nations. And Deuteronomy does not resolve that tension. At the end of the book, Moses finishes the speech and blesses the people. He dies and is buried, though the narrative says that no one ever learned where his grave was located.

SUGGESTED READING

Miller, *Deuteronomy*.

Olson, *Numbers*.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Leviticus centers on questions of what is sacred or holy. What aspects of the book seem most different from what people today might associate with the sacred? Are there connections with the way people think of the sacred today?
2. Deuteronomy focuses on the call for devotion to God. How does Deuteronomy elaborate what such devotion entails? How does Deuteronomy understand the implications of devotion to God for relationships among people?

VIOLENCE AND KINDNESS IN THE PROMISED LAND

As you recall, Joshua led the people of Israel into Canaan, capturing the cities of the Promised Land. For many readers, this is a disturbing account of violent conquest. Some interpreters have tried to move beyond the violence by relegating it to the past. Others reject the book because it seems to commend violence. As an alternative approach, we'll compare Joshua to Judges and Ruth. Judges is a haunting account of the tragic side of violence. It begins with heroism but ends in a tragic civil war. The book of Ruth then shows a remarkable openness to outsiders. In this lecture, let's ask what it means to have these three viewpoints side by side.

JOSHUA

- ◆ The story of Joshua opens as the people of Israel approach the Jordan River. Moses is now dead, and the people are being led by Joshua, a warrior. In the opening chapter, Joshua is told to be faithful to God and God will be faithful to him. This call for obedience is a central theme of the book, and Joshua exemplifies it.
- ◆ Joshua's first challenge will be the city of Jericho. Here, the priests lead a procession across the Jordan River. When their feet touch the water, the river stops flowing so the people can walk across on dry land. Next, the priests lead a procession around the city of Jericho once each day for six days. On the seventh day, they march around the city seven times. The trumpets sound, the people shout, and the walls of Jericho come tumbling down.
- ◆ The collapse of the walls is followed by Joshua's men utterly destroying the city and the people in it. The practice is called *cherem* in Hebrew. It means that something is completely given over to God. No one is allowed to take any plunder after the battle. Instead, everything is destroyed.



Historically, we're not sure what Jericho looked like in the period of Joshua, but the narrative pictures a formidable walled city that would have been difficult to capture.

- ◆ After this victory, Joshua assumes that it will be easy to capture the next city, which is called Ai. Yet when his men attack it, they are defeated. Joshua discerns the reason for defeat is that someone violated the practice of *cherem*. Joshua has the soldier executed and is then able to capture the city.
- ◆ Joshua's triumphs continue until he has conquered the land and allocated different regions to the people of Israel. In the final chapter, the people assemble in the middle of the country, at a place called Shechem. There, Joshua reaffirms his covenant bond with God. He recalls how God brought them out of Egypt and into the land of Canaan, and he voices his own loyalty to the God who gave him victory. He says, "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."
- ◆ When taken on its own, this final chapter lifts up the values of loyalty and gratitude. It recounts how God has been faithful to the people, and it emphasizes the importance of their being faithful to him. But what's disturbing is that fidelity to God is shown by violent conquest of other people. If that's what faithfulness to God means, it seems like an invitation to oppression.

JUDGES

- ◆ Scholars have often noted that where Joshua depicts triumph, Judges discloses vulnerability. And where Joshua celebrates faithfulness, Judges show a pattern of unfaithfulness within Israel. In chapter 2, Judges outlines a cycle of actions and consequences that occur repeatedly.
 - The cycle in chapter 2 is that first people turn away from the God of Israel and worship the gods of other nations. Second, God allows Israel to be dominated by those other nations. The idea is that if the people worship other gods, they will be ruled by other nations, and the narrative shows them being threatened by groups from the surrounding region.
 - Third, the people ask God to deliver them. And fourth, God raises up a military leader who defeats their enemies. Then the cycle begins again.
- ◆ One example of this cycle comes from Judges 4, in which the narrator tells us that people did evil in the sight of the Lord. In response, God allows Israel to be oppressed by the Canaanite king, who has a general named Sisera. The people then call to their God for help, and God raises up Deborah to lead them.
 - She is a prophet, which means that she communicates the word of God to people. She is also a judge, who deals with issues among the people of Israel. Deborah appoints a man named Barak to lead the Israelite warriors, but he's hesitant, and he agrees only when Deborah assures him that she will go with him.
 - The armies of Israel clash with those of Sisera, and as Sisera's chariots advance, it seems like certain defeat for the Israelites. But at the critical moment, the sky opens up and there is a rainstorm. The rain turns the field into mud, and the heavy chariots get stuck. Sisera's army then flees with the Israelites in hot pursuit.
- ◆ But the results of Deborah's victory do not last. The cycle of unfaithfulness and oppression takes place again, until we come to the judge named Samson. What people often miss in the story of Samson is the fact that violence here takes on a different role. Deborah led a military response to a national crisis. But for Samson, violence is a tool for personal revenge.
 - In chapter 13, the people of Israel have again turned away from God and are dominated by the Philistines. The people of Israel had come from the east



Samson belonged to a group called the Nazirites, who were set apart for special service to God; as a sign of this role, they did not cut their hair.

and claimed cities in the central part of the country. Samson lives along the border, where the two groups came together.

- Samson is passionate about a Philistine woman and insists on marrying her, despite their ethnic differences. But in the aftermath of the wedding, Samson's bride tells the answer to a riddle he has posed, and he is outraged. In retaliation, he goes to a Philistine city and slaughters 30 men. He then sets fire to the Philistine fields. The Philistines, in turn, kill the bride and her father for provoking the situation.
 - Things continue in this way until Samson falls in love with another Philistine woman. She learns that the secret to his strength is that his hair has never been cut. Thus, while Samson is sleeping, the Philistines cut off his hair and gouge out his eyes.
 - But as Samson's hair grows back and his strength returns, he has one more chance for revenge. One day, the Philistines have a party and force Samson to stand before them so they can ridicule him. As they do so, Samson pulls down the columns supporting the roof of the house. In this final act of revenge, the roof collapses and destroys both the Philistines and Samson himself.
- ◆ What is the story telling us about the use of violence? In some scenes, the narrator seems to relish the way Samson retaliates against the Philistines, but we can also see a downward spiral in which violence becomes a tool for personal revenge. This pattern of destruction culminates in the final chapters of Judges, where the violence is no longer turned outward but inward, and Israel is engulfed in civil war.
- In chapter 19, when a man and a woman he's living with quarrel, she storms out of the house and goes to her parents. After a while, they patch things up and decide to head home, spending the night at a house along the way. That night, some men from the town want to gang rape the man. To placate them, he shoves the woman out to them instead.
 - In the morning, the woman is lying dead on the ground. In a distressing but cunning move to avenge himself against the perpetrators, the man cuts the woman's body in pieces. Then messengers carry the parts of her body to different groups around the country, and the people decide to take vengeance against the town where the gang rape took place.
 - A war ensues, and the people of Israel nearly obliterate the tribe to which the perpetrators of the crime belonged. The violence that was once turned

outward is now turned inward. The threat to the people of Israel's well-being comes not from foreign oppressors but from the cycles of violence within their own society. The triumphant picture of conquest we saw in Joshua is gone. Judges could celebrate Deborah's victory on the battlefield, but by the end, patterns of brutality are destroying Israel's own society.

RUTH

- ◆ The story of Ruth introduces us to a man named Elkanah and his wife, Naomi. They live in the town of Bethlehem in the southern part of Israel. But because a famine is taking place, they are moving to the land of Moab. There, they are the foreigners, yet they find a place to live, and their sons marry women from Moab.
- ◆ As time passes, Elkanah and his sons die, and Naomi and her two daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah, become widows. Naomi decides to return to Bethlehem in the hope of finding help from her extended family there.
- ◆ As she prepares to leave, her daughters-in-law are grief stricken. They have a close bond with Naomi and insist that they want to come along with her. But Naomi tells them to return to their families in the hope that they might eventually marry again. The young women face the dilemma of what to do.
- ◆ Orpah honors Naomi's wishes and turns back to her people. But Ruth clings to Naomi and refuses to go. In the narrative, she says, "For where you go, I will go and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die; and there I will be buried. I will stand under the judgment of God if even death separates me from you."
- ◆ It's a moment in the story that taps into the human experience of grief and loss. It shows us the depth of loyalty and devotion and turns the plot in a direction of hope. Now, Naomi and Ruth journey together to Bethlehem.
- ◆ They reach the field of a man named Boaz, a relative of Naomi's dead husband. Boaz is impressed with Ruth's hard work and the way she cares for Naomi, and ultimately, he and she are married.

- ◆ The story has moved from loss to a new relationship. And the end has one final surprise. We learn that Ruth and Boaz had children and grandchildren and that their great-grandson was King David. David was the king who did the most to define Israel's national identity; thus, it's intriguing to think of Ruth—a foreigner—as his great-grandmother.

SUGGESTED READING

Gunn, *Judges through the Centuries*.

Pressler, *Joshua, Judges, and Ruth*.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. The book of Judges is sometimes read as a collection of hero stories. To what extent might Deborah and Samson be considered heroic? What elements would not fit the usual assumptions of heroism?
2. The main figures in the book of Ruth must deal with loss and dislocation. What losses does Naomi experience, and how does she deal with them? What losses does Ruth experience, and how does she deal with them? What similarities and differences do you see?

SAUL, THE TRAGIC KING

In this lecture, we begin a consideration of the rule of the first three kings of Israel. Israel has moved from a rather loose confederation of 12 tribes into the struggle for a more unified national identity. Historically, we are in the decades just prior 1000 B.C. It's a time of major political change. Up to this point, the people have relied on judges and warlords to maintain order and defend their territories against invasion. But now, they'll be governed by kings, which marks the beginning of a new era. And the first king, our focus for this lecture, is Saul.

ACT 1: END OF AN ERA

- ◆ We'll read 1 Samuel as a drama in three acts: Act 1 recounts the end of the old era by focusing on a judge named Samuel. Act 2 marks the beginning of a new era, as Samuel identifies Saul as Israel's first king and Saul rises to power. Finally, Act 3 traces the path of Saul's tragic downfall.
- ◆ In Act 1, God seems to be the primary shaper of events. The actions that occur carry out God's purpose, which is to change a pattern of corruption among the clergy.
 - Having witnessed corruption at the sanctuary of the Ark of the Covenant, God determines to take action. He answers the prayer of a woman named Hannah, who has no children but desperately wants one, enabling her to bear a son called Samuel.
 - In gratitude, Hannah offers a prayer of celebration, which tells of God turning the social order upside down: He will destroy the weapons of the powerful, while giving help to the needy; he will bring down the rich and arrogant, while giving honor to the poor. This prayer foreshadows a time of dramatic social change.
- ◆ This change is achieved through a battle, in which the people of Israel wrongly assume that God is on their side. Their adversaries are the Philistines. Because

the soldiers of Israel want God to support them, they take the Ark of the Covenant into battle. But in a stunning turn of events, God's judgment unfolds by allowing Israel's army to suffer defeat. In battle, the ark of is captured by the Philistines, and the corrupt priesthood at the sanctuary is brought to an end.

ACT 2: SAUL'S RISE TO POWER

- ◆ By the end of Act I, the old era has reached its end, and Samuel has begun to serve as a fair and honest judge for the people. But soon, Samuel's sons fall into corruption, and it becomes clear that the old patterns will persist. Act II begins in chapter 8, where the people tell Samuel that they no longer want the old system of leadership by judges. They want a king in order to be like other nations.
- ◆ This request is an enormous misstep. It is a point of conflict between human desire and the purposes of God. The people assume that a king will give them prestige, status, and security, yet Samuel warns that kingship will bring the opposite—oppression, abuse of power, heavy taxation, and more. In the face of their insistent demand, however, Samuel discerns God's response to let them have a king. Here, we can see the dimension of human responsibility emerging more clearly. The new phase begins when God gives in to human demand, and their misguided intentions set the course of events.
- ◆ In chapter 9, we are introduced to a young man named Saul, who seems to have considerable promise as a leader. Indeed, Samuel discerns that Saul is to be the new king over Israel. Samuel performs a symbolic action—anointing—that will enable Saul to rise to the heights of royal power. After Saul is anointed, he is filled with God's Spirit, which empowers him for leadership.
- ◆ Saul then encounters his first major challenge as king. The crisis involves a town on the eastern side of the Jordan River that is under attack from a neighboring warlord. The people of the town send messengers to Saul, pleading for help. Saul responds with a show of strength that saves the city. His triumph establishes his reputation as a leader.

- ◆ Given this promising beginning, where do things go wrong? The narrative does not give us any simple answers. To some extent, it appears that Saul brings problems on himself. He makes decisions that, on one level, make good political and military sense, but on another level, reflect character flaws that will be his undoing. Yet there is also another dimension that involves Saul's alienation from Samuel and, ultimately, from God. That will mean that Saul must struggle against God's decision to replace him as king.
 - In chapter 15, Samuel tells Saul to go into battle against a troublesome desert tribe east of the Jordan River and to destroy all the people and livestock.
 - Initially, Saul is ready to engage in total war, but he objects that it would be a shame to let the enemy's wealth go to waste. Even though Saul is not supposed to take any booty, he thinks that skimming off the best of the enemy's property would be acceptable. To show their gratitude, Saul believes that the Israelites can offer a little something to God at one of the local sanctuaries.
 - In response, the writer of 1 Samuel says that God came to regret that he ever made Saul king. Although God was the one who chose Saul, Saul has now proven to be unreliable. God initially sends Samuel to confront Saul about the matter, but Saul merely tries to shift blame to the people.
 - Yet Saul's attempt to evade responsibility brings things to the breaking point. Samuel declares that what God wants most is obedience to his word. Thus, Samuel gives Saul this haunting declaration: "Because you have rejected the word of God, God has rejected you from being king." This loss of divine support means that Saul is reduced to being king in name only.

ACT 3: SAUL'S DOWNFALL

- ◆ The third act begins in chapter 16, where Saul's loss of status is made clear by the selection of a new leader, who will eventually replace Saul. In Bethlehem, Samuel meets a shepherd named David whom he discerns to be the chosen king of Israel. Samuel anoints David to show that he will be the new leader, but the anointing is not made public. Saul knows nothing about it, and he unwittingly takes David into his service.
- ◆ Saul becomes liable to deep brooding and melancholy, and to deal with it, he tries to find refuge in music. David is brought into the court as a musician, but his presence intensifies Saul's moodiness when he becomes popular. A major

The Philistine Goliath dares the Israelites to send one of their best soldiers to take him on in single combat, but no one is willing—until David says that he will fight and, of course, wins the seemingly impossible contest.



step in David's rise and Saul's downfall comes when David achieves renown by killing the giant Philistine named Goliath. Finally, Saul's rage gets out of control; he throws a spear at David, who must run for his life.

- ◆ David flees to the desert, where he becomes the leader of an outlaw band. From Saul's perspective, David has become a kind of charismatic gang boss. Saul makes a desperate attempt to capture David, but he fails. Eventually, Saul must give up the chase, because the Philistines are on the march again and are threatening to bring down Saul's kingdom.
- ◆ As we approach the end of the story, Saul is a failed king, who is running out of options. The Philistine armies are encircling his kingdom. As he faces the greatest battle of his career, Saul can see that his army has no chance. In the blackness of night, he makes a final plea for help from the spirit world. He makes his way to the home of a woman who claims to be able to consult the spirits of the dead.
- ◆ Saul asks the woman to bring up the spirit of Samuel, who had died some years before. The woman says that she sees a figure who looks like an old man. Saul believes it to be Samuel's ghost and pleads with the spirit of the dead man for help. Saul tells the spirit that God no longer answers him. But the spirit responds by saying that Saul has brought this on himself, because Saul is the one who turned away from God, and God is now letting Saul's destructive decision take its course. The spirit warns that in battle the following day, the end will come. Saul and his sons will soon join Samuel in the realm of the dead.
- ◆ On the day of battle, the spirit's words come true. The Philistine army overwhelms Saul, and Saul is mortally wounded. In an act of self-assertion, he commands his armor-bearer to kill him so that his enemies might not have the pleasure of doing so. But the armor-bearer refuses, and Saul falls on his own sword. Having set this course of self-destruction, Saul follows it out to the end.

INTERPRETING 1 SAMUEL

- ◆ One major approach to interpreting this tragedy is to see Saul as a negative moral example. We see how bad decisions lead to bad results, and we trace the way his early acts of decisive leadership became tainted by arrogance and jealousy. We must guard against the sins of pride and envy, because they inevitably lead to a person's downfall.

- ◆ A second approach is to consider Saul as a tragic victim of circumstances. From this perspective, Saul had good intentions, but he made mistakes, and those mistakes set in motion a downward spiral of events that went far beyond his control. His unthinking actions led to tragic alienation from God, and once that course was set, Saul was trapped, with no way out.
- ◆ The book of 1 Samuel makes clear that Saul's story ended badly. But it does not offer an easy explanation of why. It might be convenient simply to say that it was all Saul's fault, yet such an answer is scarcely adequate when dealing with tragedy of this magnitude. Saul turned away from God unwittingly. Did he really deserve his terrible fate? And it might be equally convenient to say that it was all the will of God, as if the writer envisions God as some inexorable force of destiny, against which people can only struggle. But that answer, too, is inadequate.
- ◆ Saul's choices seem to have played a significant role in his downfall. Instead of offering simple answers, this book draws us more deeply into the questions. Instead of resolving the tensions, the writer presses us to encounter them more deeply. Enabling us to do so may be this book's most enduring legacy.

SUGGESTED READING

Green, *King Saul's Asking*.

McKenzie and McMurray, "Saul, Son of Kish."

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. The lecture began by asking why tragedy has had such an enduring place in world literature. What factors do you think contribute most to tragedy's importance?
2. Saul is sometimes understood quite negatively as willful and arrogant, yet some view him more sympathetically as a person struggling against God and himself. How would you describe Saul's character?

DAVID AND NATION BUILDING

In this lecture, we turn to David, the successor to Israel's first king, Saul. David's reign is recounted in 2 Samuel. As we'll see, David, more than anyone else, defined Israel's identity as a nation. He won victories in war, brought unity to a divided people, and established a political dynasty that ruled for centuries. In many ways, belonging to the people of Israel meant identifying with the hope and promise that David represented. The challenge, of course, is that David became such a symbol of the nation that it can be difficult to get to know him as a person. To understand such figures with national significance, we need to look behind their iconic images.

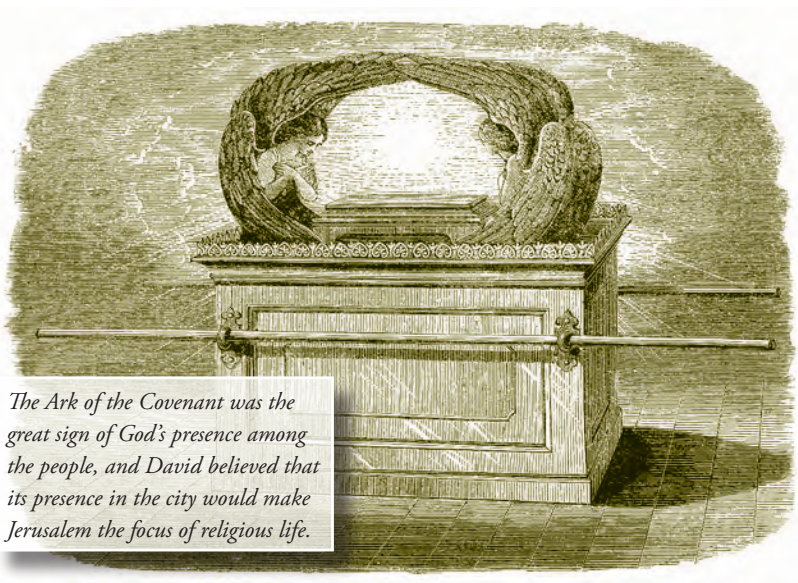
DAVID'S TRIUMPHS

- ◆ As you recall, David was secretly anointed to be king while Saul, his predecessor, was still alive. Not long thereafter, Saul met his end in battle with the Philistines. Because there was no clear plan of succession, Saul's death created a crisis of leadership that split the country in two. The northern part of the country thought that power should be transferred to Saul's son. But people in the south thought power belonged to the most gifted leader, David, who was also a southerner.
- ◆ When the country split in half, the people of the north established their capital at a town called Mahanaim and referred to themselves as the people of Israel. At this point in the story, the name *Israel* refers specifically to the northern tribes. In contrast, the people of the south referred to themselves as the people of Judah. They located their capital at the city of Hebron, where David had his power base.
- ◆ The peoples of Israel and Judah engaged in a civil war for some time; the tipping point came through palace intrigues and assassination in the north. Saul's son lost the confidence of his key supporters, and they killed him. His death again

created a power vacuum, convincing many in the north that the only real option was to give their support to David. Thus, the civil war ended when the people of the north came to David at Hebron and declared that they would recognize him as their king (2 Sam. 5) over a united country.

DAVID'S CHALLENGE

- ◆ David's victory in the civil war created a new leadership challenge for him: It meant that he had the opportunity to lead the people into a different future, but the question was whether he would use that opportunity effectively or whether he would squander it.
- ◆ Early on, David sought to unify the country, to move it beyond the old divisions created by civil war. A major step here was to create a new capital city, for which he chose Jerusalem. The city was located on the dividing line between north and south. David's troops succeeded in capturing Jerusalem from the Jebusites, and it became the new political center for the country.
- ◆ Because David also wanted Jerusalem to become the religious center for the nation, he decided to bring the Ark of the Covenant there. He staged a grand procession to bring the ark to his capital city and placed it in a tent.
- ◆ On the one hand, we might read David's success in giving Jerusalem both political and religious significance as an account of his devotion to God. After all, David offered prayers and sacrifices when he brought the ark to Jerusalem. We might discern in these actions the recognition that he, as king, is still subject to a higher authority, and that recognition would create an implicit limit in the use of political power. It would mean that David, as king, along with his people, were finally accountable to a God, whose authority was higher than theirs.
- ◆ On the other hand, we might also read this as an account of David making use of religious rituals to serve his own political ends. He had already made Jerusalem into his new political capital. Thus, we might see the return of the ark as an effort to give religious support to his new central government. Instead of seeing David honoring the higher authority of God, we might see it as the



The Ark of the Covenant was the great sign of God's presence among the people, and David believed that its presence in the city would make Jerusalem the focus of religious life.

opposite. We might interpret this as David's attempt to use the authority of God to support his own royal agenda.

DAVID AS FOUNDER OF A DYNASTY

- ◆ At the beginning of 2 Samuel 7, David is comfortably settled into his house or palace in Jerusalem. He assumes that if he, as king, has a house, then God should have a house, too; specifically, he thinks that the Ark of the Covenant should have a permanent house or temple, rather than a tent. He relays this idea to a prophet named Nathan.
- ◆ Nathan tells David that God is quite satisfied with the traditional practice of placing the Ark of the Covenant in a tent and sees no need to change that arrangement. Instead, God sees himself as the builder—the builder of a house or dynasty for David. God promises that David's descendants will inherit his throne. And through that Davidic dynasty, God will establish a kingdom that

will endure forever. Once God has built a house or dynasty for David, one of David's sons can build a house or temple for God.

- ◆ In that same passage, Nathan compares God's relationship to the king to that of a father and his son. In ancient Israel, people believed that God adopted each king as his son, but that did not mean that the king was exempt from criticism. Nathan explains that just as an earthly father would discipline his son whenever the child did something wrong, God will discipline the king. Yet just as earthly father would remain committed to his son—even a disobedient son—God will remain committed to David and his heirs forever.
- ◆ As we continue reading 2 Samuel, we find that despite the promise of God's support, David is deeply flawed. He is capable of infidelity and brutality and must come to terms with the consequences of his own personal failings.
 - In 2 Samuel 11, David is at home in his palace in Jerusalem while his army is fighting many miles away. One day, David catches a glimpse of a beautiful woman, Bathsheba, bathing in a house nearby. Her husband is away on active military duty. David has Bathsheba brought to his room, where he sleeps with her. Sometime later, Bathsheba lets David know that she is pregnant.
 - David thinks he can cover up the affair by bringing Bathsheba's husband back from military duty for a short home visit. But the husband refuses to sleep with Bathsheba while all his men are camped in the field. Then, David sends Bathsheba's husband on a suicide mission and takes Bathsheba as his own wife.
 - The prophet Nathan is appalled by David's machinations. Nathan had told David that God wants to build him a dynasty and that God will establish David's kingdom forever. Nathan confronts David by telling a parable (2 Sam. 12), in which a rich man unjustly slaughters the lamb of a poor man.
 - Outraged at the injustice in the parable, David condemns what the rich man has done and declares that the rich man must repay the poor man four times the amount taken. Already, we can see the parable doing its work. Nathan did not have to tell David that what the rich man did was unjust. The story moved David himself to see the injustice. This allows Nathan to turn David's judgment against the rich man in the story into a judgment against David's own actions.
 - To make sure that David does not miss the point, Nathan tells him that if it is wrong for a rich man to take a poor man's lamb, then it is far worse for the

king to seize another man's wife. And it is unconscionable to have the man killed in order to cover up the affair. This audacious confrontation of the king works. David acknowledges his wrongdoing. That is perhaps the one admirable trait David displays in this whole sordid affair: He proves capable of taking ownership for what he has done.

- Nathan forgives David, but forgiveness does not mean that David's actions have no consequences. Nathan warns that David has set in motion a pattern of violence that will continue into the next generation. To be sure, David repents of what he has done, but he cannot control what his children will do. And the last part of 2 Samuel tells of the violent pattern that David has set in motion being followed by one of his sons, Absalom.

THE STORY OF ABSALOM

- ◆ In 2 Samuel 15, we learn that Absalom, like David, has both ambition and ability and is brilliant at currying favor with the public. Eventually, Absalom has enough support to launch his bid for kingship, which he does in the city of Hebron, just as David had done years before. And just as David then captured Jerusalem to make it his capital, Absalom sets out to capture Jerusalem. He succeeds and sets out after David, in what promises to be a decisive battle.
- ◆ Underneath this political and military maneuvering, the personal side of the story moves toward a heartbreaking conclusion. Although Absalom has rebelled, David still loves him. Thus, as the time for battle approaches, David tells his men, "Deal gently with the young man Absalom." But that does not prove to be easy during the chaos of war, and Absalom is killed. A messenger brings the news to David.
- ◆ At the end of chapter 18, when David gets the news of Absalom's death, he is deeply moved. In grief, he weeps: "O my son Absalom, my son, my son, Absalom. Would that I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son." David's words express the willingness of a parent to sacrifice his or her own life for the sake of a child. The scene captures the heartrending sorrow of someone whose child has set out on a destructive path, from which not even the most devoted love can save him.

- ◆ It may also be that David weeps not only for Absalom but also for himself. After all, his son is simply following in his father's footsteps. David's life set a pattern in motion, a pattern of violence and abuse that continued to play out in the life of Absalom. In the affair with Bathsheba and its aftermath, David ruined the lives of others to satisfy his own desires. David grieves not only as someone who has lost a child but as someone whose own moral failings set the pattern that led to the loss.

SUGGESTED READING

Birch, "The First and Second Books of Samuel."

Steussy, *David: Biblical Portraits of Power*.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. The lecture began by noting David's role as a national symbol. What parts of his legacy contributed most to that role, and why?
2. The idea that David was chosen by God to be the founder of a dynasty plays a central role in 2 Samuel, and it is often mentioned in other parts of the Bible. Why, then, would 2 Samuel also tell readers about David's moral failings and family conflicts? Do those aspects help or hurt the overall portrayal of David's importance?

SOLOMON, A STUDY IN CONTRADICTIONS



fter the first two kings of Israel, Saul and David, came Solomon, who is remembered for his legendary wisdom and wealth. The writer of 1 Kings tells us of Solomon's learning, his interest in arts, and his monumental building projects. But the writer is quite aware that Solomon's reign is a study in contradictions. In this lecture, we'll explore those contradictions and ask why such a story might continue to engage our imaginations. How can the same story present both wisdom and ruthless ambition, splendor and oppression, and religious devotion mixed with infidelity? In the end, we will see Solomon's son making a fateful decision about which side of his father's legacy he would claim and carry forward.

AMBITION VERSUS WISDOM

- ◆ The opening chapters of 1 Kings juxtapose Solomon's wisdom with ruthless ambition—and ambition takes the lead in the story. As the story begins, King David is old and feeble, and his incapacity has created a power vacuum. Members of his court are beginning to position themselves to assume the kingship after David's death.
- ◆ In competition are David's eldest living son, Adonijah, and Solomon, the son of David and Bathsheba. Both put together coalitions of influential supporters and plan rival coronation ceremonies. Ultimately, Solomon wins out, and he promises that if Adonijah proves to be no threat, he will be allowed to live. But if Solomon suspects Adonijah of disloyalty, he will kill him, which is, of course, what happens.
- After David's death, Adonijah asked if he could marry the young woman who had been David's nurse. Solomon saw this as a political move that might give Adonijah prestige in the public eye. Thus, Solomon immediately ordered that Adonijah be assassinated. He also ordered the assassination of the military commander and the arrest of the priest who had supported Adonijah.

- At the end of chapter 2, there is a sentence that is so simple we might miss its meaning: “So the kingdom was established in the hand of Solomon.” In other words, it was established through palace intrigue, multiple assassinations, and arrest.
- ◆ At this juncture in the story, two different portraits of Solomon collide. Everything we’ve seen so far gives us a portrait of someone who gained political power through ruthless ambition and retains power through violence. It’s a pattern that has been played out countless times in history. But now, in chapter 3, we find a different portrait of Solomon. Here, he is depicted as a thoughtful king who asks God for the wisdom needed to govern his people rightly.
 - Solomon has a dream, and in the dream God says, “Ask what I should give you.” Solomon responds with gratitude for the steadfast love that God showed to his father, David. He speaks about the challenges of governing and asks God to give him an understanding mind. Solomon prays for the wisdom to distinguish good from evil in order that he might govern the people well.
 - Solomon’s request for wisdom pleases God, and in the dream, God promises to grant the request. What’s more, God will add long life and great wealth to Solomon’s legacy. This is the chapter that paints a portrait of Solomon as the wise king, who will bring about a cultural renaissance in Israel and establish a monarchy with extraordinary wealth.
- ◆ The scene that follows illustrates Solomon’s wisdom and insight into human nature. It is the famous story of Solomon offering to cut a child in half to settle a dispute between two women about who is the child’s mother. Of course, the woman who protests must be the child’s true parent. The idea in this scene is that through his wisdom, Solomon sees that justice is done.
- ◆ By this point in the story, we have two rather different perspectives at play. In some places, we see the ruthless Solomon, who will stop at nothing in his effort to secure the kingship for himself. And in other places, we see the wise Solomon, whose greatest desire is governing his people rightly. The writer presses us to see both aspects, and as he does so, he implicitly raises questions about the nature of leadership. What might come from the ruthless acquisition of power? What difference might it make to follow the path of wisdom?

SPLendor VERSUS OPPRESSION

- ◆ The writer of 1 Kings shows us yet another dimension of the story when he contrasts the splendor of Solomon's kingdom with his oppression of the people. The writer tells us of Solomon's impressive achievements, while pointing to the brutality that made those achievements possible. On the impressive side of the equation, Solomon creates a vast administrative structure for his kingdom, expands his military capacity and international trade, and fortifies cities. In Jerusalem, Solomon spends years building an exquisite palace for himself and a temple for God.
- ◆ Yet the writer of 1 Kings also repeatedly tells us that Solomon had to oppress people to achieve what he did. We find this theme in chapter 5, where Solomon orders expensive building materials, which must be paid for by heavy taxation on his people, and uses forced labor.
- ◆ Throughout the story of Solomon, splendor and oppression go hand in hand. For each impressive building project, there are the people who are forced to do the work. Again, the writer of 1 Kings raises the implicit question: What will come of all this? Can readers say that the impressive results are worth the price in human suffering? Or will they find that such harsh methods finally undermine Solomon's effort to achieve greatness?

DEVOTION VERSUS INFIDELITY

- ◆ The third aspect of the story is its religious dimension. In religious terms, Solomon's reign involves both devotion and infidelity. For much of the story, it is Solomon's devotion to God that seems primary. After all, his most significant project was building the temple for God in Jerusalem—the temple that would be the central religious institution of Israel for centuries.
- ◆ The writer of 1 Kings gives us an extensive description of the temple, including the central building, the bronze basin in front of it, an altar for animal sacrifices, and the interior rooms. The festival at which Solomon dedicated the new temple is described in 1 Kings 8. It is a scene filled with religious pageantry, in which the priests stage a procession to bring the Ark of the Covenant to the temple for

The splendor of Solomon's court is celebrated in a famous scene in which the Queen of Sheba visits and says that king's court surpasses everything she has heard about it.



the first time. The writer tells of Solomon offering countless sheep and oxen as sacrifices. Then, a cloud—signifying divine glory—fills the temple.

- ◆ At this point, Solomon offers a prayer that defines the significance of the temple. We learn that the temple is where God is uniquely present. The prayer says that God's dwelling place is actually in heaven, which means that God can't be confined to any one place on earth. Instead, the temple is the place where God has made his "name" to dwell.
 - The emphasis on the name shows that God has a particular identity, and it's an identity that is revealed through what he does for people. If someone asks which God is worshipped in the temple, the response is that it's the God who delivered Israel out of slavery. It's the God who made a covenant with them and shows steadfast love to them.
 - Those commitments give God his identity. Thus, when people come to the temple for worship, it's a tangible way of turning toward the God whose identity has been made known in this way.
- ◆ Solomon's prayer depicts the temple as a visible sign of God's willingness to listen to people who need help. The prayer tells of people who are victims of wrongdoing, who suffer from hunger and illness. Solomon recognizes that such people may come from Israel or from other nations. And in every case, Solomon asks that as they turn toward the temple, the God who dwells in heaven might hear them and act graciously to them. The temple is to be a focus for prayer—for Israel and for people everywhere.
- ◆ If the main theme of Solomon's prayer is that God should faithfully listen to people, then the conclusion of the prayer brings that idea full circle. If God listens to people, then people should also listen to God. They should heed his commandments and lead lives of integrity and compassion, as God desires. In the context of 1 Kings, that seems logical enough. But here, the writer shows us a third contradiction in Solomon: that between his public devotion to God and his readiness to support the worship of other gods when that seems convenient.
 - Through making political marriage alliances with neighboring countries, Solomon has accumulated 700 wives and 300 concubines. To keep all his wives happy, Solomon builds sanctuaries to the various gods they worship.

- Although Solomon's words may call for devotion to God, his actions contradict that. His public prayer expresses lofty ideals, but his personal life turns religious commitment into doing whatever is needed to placate members of his household.

A LEGACY OF CONTRADICTIONS

- ◆ As Solomon's life draws to a close, he leaves a legacy of contradictions. And this leads us to a haunting question: How will the next generation deal with the contradictions it inherits?
- ◆ In chapter 12, the writer of 1 Kings takes us to a critical moment when Solomon's son Rehoboam must determine the wisest course of action as he begins to rule. The people come to Rehoboam and plead with him, asking that he ease up on the use of forced labor and heavy taxation.
- ◆ The older members of the court think the wisest course of action is to become a leader who serves the people well. From their perspective, wisdom means that a leader governs graciously and fairly. When we think back to the story of Solomon, that is the kind of wisdom he once prayed for. But the younger members of the court say the opposite; they think wisdom calls for forcefulness. In their eyes, Solomon achieved greatness by subjugating the people, not by serving them.
- ◆ Solomon's son chooses to continue the brutal side of his father's legacy. He identifies leadership with subjugation rather than service. And it shatters the country. In 922 B.C., the people in the northern half of the country reject the harsh policies of Rehoboam and break away to form their own kingdom. They also establish their own sanctuaries. And as in the time before David reunited the nation, the people of the north call themselves Israel. Only the people of the south remain loyal to Solomon's son and continue to worship in the temple in Jerusalem; as in the past, they call themselves Judah.

SUGGESTED READING

Brueggemann, *Solomon: Israel's Icon of Human Achievement*.

Weitzman, *Solomon: The Lure of Wisdom*.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. A theme in the story of Solomon is the importance of wisdom. According to 1 Kings, which of Solomon's achievements exemplify wisdom? What distinguishes wisdom from cunning or shrewdness?
2. Solomon is remembered as the builder of the temple in Jerusalem. According to 1 Kings, what was the significance of the temple for ancient Israel?

PSALMS: THE BIBLE'S SONGBOOK

The book of Psalms includes 150 songs, poems, and prayers, each of which represents the power of music to express our different experiences, feelings, and moods. In this lecture, we'll consider four types of psalms that appear in various forms throughout the book. First are the songs of praise, which have a joyful tone. Second are the prayers for help, which express grief and the need for hope. Third are psalms of gratitude, which give thanks for something good that has happened. And fourth are psalms that express trust.

PSALM 150

- ◆ Psalm 150 is a wonderful example of a psalm of praise. The first line and last lines of this psalm are identical: “Praise the Lord!” And that simple expression of praise at the beginning and end frames everything in between.
- ◆ Indeed, the lyrics of this psalm have a repetitive quality, with one line saying something similar to the proceeding one. The pattern is called *parallelism*, and it characterizes Hebrew poetry. The first verse of Psalm 150 makes two statements about where God should be praised. First, it says, “Praise God in his sanctuary”; then, it adds, “Praise him in his mighty heavens.”
 - The repetition of these two statements about place creates a sense of movement. The psalm initially places readers in the sanctuary or temple, where the community gathers for worship. The festive tone shows that the worshippers have come to express joy through music.
 - Then the psalm directs attention upward, toward the heavens. It doesn't allow worshippers to confine praise within the walls of a building but points to the vastness of heaven, which is also the place of God's presence.
- ◆ Next, the psalm tells us why praise should be given, again, in parallel lines. The text says, “Praise him for his mighty deeds. Praise him according to his surpassing greatness.” In other words, give praise because of God's action and

his character. We're not told which of God's mighty deeds the writer has in mind, but as readers, we must use our imagination to fill out the picture.

PSALM 148

- ◆ In psalms of praise, the feeling is one of joy, yet it's hard to tell people to feel joy and simply expect it to happen. Joy is deeply connected to the experience of something good. And psalms of praise are most meaningful when they tap into an experience that the readers themselves have had. For example, Psalm 148 evokes the sense of wonder that people experience when they're surrounded by the natural world.
- ◆ The first word in Psalm 148 is again "Hallelujah," or "Praise the Lord." The next line draws our imagination toward the sky, in the same repetitive style we've seen before. It reads, "Praise the Lord from the heavens; praise him in the heights! Praise him, all his angels, praise him all his host!"
- ◆ Then, in rapid succession, the sun, moon, and stars come into view, and the psalm then speaks as if the heavenly bodies actually join in the chorus of praise. It reads, "Praise him, sun and moon; praise him, all you shining stars." The language is poetic, of course, but it suggests that the heavenly bodies not only evoke wonder in human beings, but they also praise God by their shining.
- ◆ Eventually, human beings get into the act as kings and commoners, men and women, young and old add their praises to the song. Notice that people are not set apart from the natural world but are within it. The praise they offer to God is part of a much larger chorus that includes the whispering of the wind, the falling of the rain, and the mysterious sounds of creatures everywhere.

PSALM 13

- ◆ Psalms that are prayers for help are sometimes called *laments*. Instead of expressing joy, they convey grief, bringing the experience of human anguish to expression before God. Psalm 13 is a good example. The psalm has only six verses, but it takes us on an emotional journey. The first two verses consist of anguished, unanswered questions. The middle two verses plead for help. And

the last two offer a sense of hope that will enable the writer to live on, despite the pain of the present moment.

- ◆ The first two verses of the psalm ask, “How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?” We might imagine these words being uttered in a tone of quiet desperation. But the words can also convey an emotional intensity that borders on anger. In the opening line, the psalm speaks of being forgotten by God, as if God is distracted and failing to pay attention. But the next line goes further, and asks, “How long will you hide your face from me?” It seems as if God is not merely distracted but has intentionally and inexplicably turned away.
- ◆ The psalm expresses what this abandonment feels like by asking, “How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and have sorrow in my heart all day long? How long will my enemy triumph over me?” Significantly, these questions are not answered. The lament psalms recognize that in situations of grief and loss, people often need to express what they feel without any attempt to suppress it. Psalm 13 gives voice to painful questions that resist simplistic answers.
- ◆ The language here is evocative. The writer refers to some unnamed “enemy” that’s getting the best of him, but that enemy is left undefined. When we turn to the middle two verses, which plead for help, we sometimes get the impression that the writer is dealing with human opponents, yet the enemy might also be some kind of illness. In these same verses, the writer pleads for help because he’s falling into the sleep of death.
- ◆ This evocative quality contributes to the psalm’s value for many readers. It allows them to relate the psalm to various experiences in their own lives. What’s more, the psalm empowers them to talk back to God. Where the opening verses picture God hiding his face from the situation, the middle verses tell God, “Look at me!” Where the opening verses ask pointed questions that are left unresolved, the middle verses say, “Answer me!”
- ◆ In musical terms, everything in the psalm thus far has been disturbing and dissonant. But as we come to the last two verses, the music shifts from the minor key to a major one. A ray of light enters the darkness, as despair turns toward hope. The writer has not found answers to his questions, but he needs

to live in the face of those questions. And what enables him to do that is that he trusts God's steadfast love.

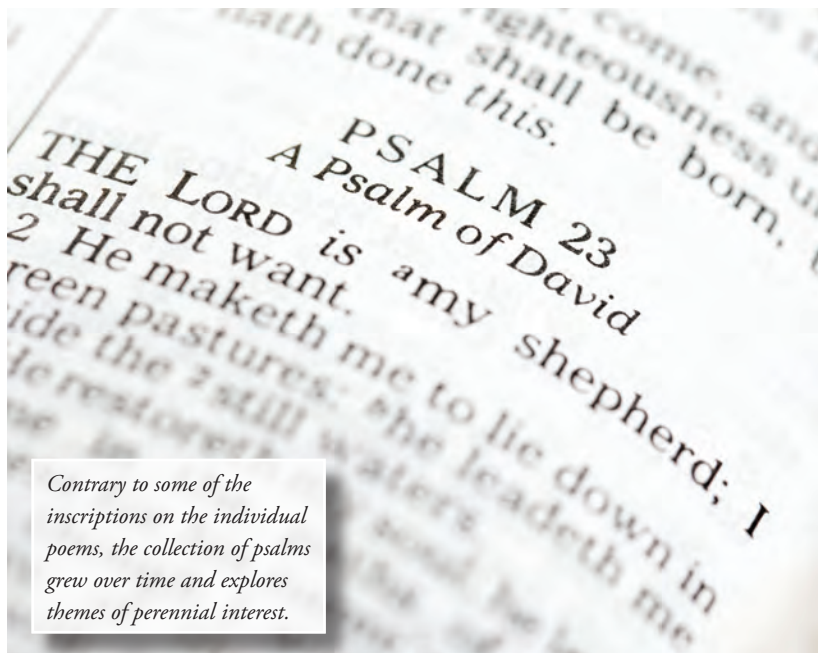
PSALM 32

- ◆ Most psalms that give thanks have a basic pattern: They begin with an expression of gratitude. Then, in the middle, the writer looks back to the difficult situation in which help was received. At the end, the writer invites others to join in giving thanks.
- ◆ In Psalm 32, we find a writer who has caused his own problems. He is responsible for something that has gone terribly wrong and must come to terms with the fact that he's done something that he deeply regrets. What's notable about this psalm is the way it probes the depths of that experience.
- ◆ The opening lines are written in the repetitive style we saw earlier: "Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered." Then, "Blessed is the one against whom the Lord counts no iniquity, and in whose spirit is no deceit." The Hebrew word for "blessed" here expresses a sense of well-being and wholeness.
- ◆ The next passage challenges any simplistic reading. The text at first gives the impression that people are either righteous or wicked, but then those simple alternatives are broken down. The writer may want to think of himself as a good person, but he's been in the wrong, and as we move to the middle of the psalm, he must come to terms with this. The psalm recognizes that all people, including religious people, are fallible, and the process of dealing with one's own failings is a deeply human enterprise.
- ◆ The writer knows that the most natural response to having done something hurtful is to cover it up, but that creates an internal dissonance between the person the writer wants to be and the person he really is. The psalm describes this internal struggle vividly: "When I kept silence, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long."
- ◆ The turning point comes when the writer breaks the silence and takes responsibility for what has happened. He turns outward, moving from his

internal brooding to speak directly to God, and he finds that telling the truth is a major step toward healing. The process is completed through forgiveness, which brings a restoration of relationship.

PSALM 23

- ◆ Psalm 23, which begins, “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want,” is one of the most well-known passages in the Bible. The hallmark of this psalm is its use of extended metaphor, depicting God’s relationship to people as that of a shepherd to his sheep. The evocative quality of this image allows the psalm to be connected to human experience in various ways, contributing to its broad appeal.
- ◆ The psalm takes up the theme of life’s vulnerability. There is no sense of crisis here, as we’ve seen in some other psalms. But there is a sense that life can be uncertain, so that help and support are needed each day.



- ◆ The sense of vulnerability is heightened in verse 4, which says, “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me. Your rod and your staff they comfort me.” People hear this vivid imagery as offering assurance of God’s presence. Even as life slips away, people are not left alone.
- ◆ In the final verses of the psalm, the imagery changes. God is no longer a shepherd but the host at a banquet. And people are no longer sheep but guests. The psalm says, “You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life. And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”
- ◆ As the imagery changes, the sense of vulnerability persists because there are still unnamed “enemies” in view. Yet the sense of protection and care also persists and even grows. God not only provides the basics but offers a life so abundant that it seems like a banquet. And if enemies treat a person with contempt, God offers a place of honor and dignity.

SUGGESTED READING

Brown, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of the Psalms*.

Jacobson and Jacobson, *Invitation to the Psalms*.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. The psalms were written in a cultural context that differs from those of modern readers. In what ways do the ancient poetic images seem strange and difficult to interpret? In what ways do they remain accessible and engaging?
2. The lecture noted points at which the psalms use evocative imagery that can be connected to human experience in various ways. What possibilities does that present for interpretation? What problems might arise in the process?

BIBLICAL WISDOM LITERATURE

In this lecture, we'll explore what are known as the Bible's *wisdom* books: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job. These books create a kind of dialogue or even a debate over the meaning of life. Proverbs takes a practical approach, assuming that the world makes sense and that if you follow good advice, you can have a successful and rewarding life. But Ecclesiastes presses the question. You can work hard and succeed, but then you die. Job goes even further by insisting that life isn't just meaningless but unfair. You can do all the right things, but disease and disaster can take it all away. These three books leave us with intriguing questions: Can life be meaningful? And if so, how?

PROVERBS

- ◆ Proverbs is a collection of material that was put together over many centuries from sources in different cultures. The first nine chapters of the book are a poetic introduction to the collections of wise sayings that follow.
- ◆ The basic perspective is introduced in Proverbs 1:7, which says, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge.” Proverbs assumes that the quest for knowledge is, at heart, a religious exercise. People honor God by exercising their minds in all fields of study. The world is God’s handiwork, and all attempts to understand it probe the mysteries of what God has done. Proverbs has no patience for the idea that reverence for God puts an end to critical thought.
- ◆ The poetic introduction emphasizes that actions have consequences—just the kind of lesson parents want their children to learn. Thus, Proverbs begins with advice to listen to one’s father and mother and not to get in with the wrong circle of friends. We hear a parental tone in what follows and see that beneath all the admonitions is a genuine concern for the child’s welfare.

- ◆ The positive alternative is to listen to wisdom, who is often personified as a woman in the opening chapters. Especially memorable is Proverbs 8, where wisdom promises to teach the kind of good judgment that leads to a good life. The poem goes on to say that wisdom was present with God when the world itself was created.
- ◆ In chapter 10, the collections of proverbs begin, and they provide the basic curriculum for a “school of life.” They’re practical and distill complex forms of experience into single sentences. They give us a basic orientation toward a situation, while assuming that we will need to work out the details as we go. For example, Proverbs 10:4 says, “A slack hand causes poverty, but the hand of the diligent makes rich.”
- ◆ Some of the proverbs warn about the problem of arrogance. Proverbs 16:18 reads, “Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall.” Interestingly, alongside the proverbs that promote a successful life are some that remind us that money isn’t everything. Proverbs 17 begins, “Better is a dry crust of bread where there is quiet, than a house full of feasting with strife.”



The female figure of wisdom is with God at the time he created the first human being, giving shape to the existing order of things.

ECCLESIASTES

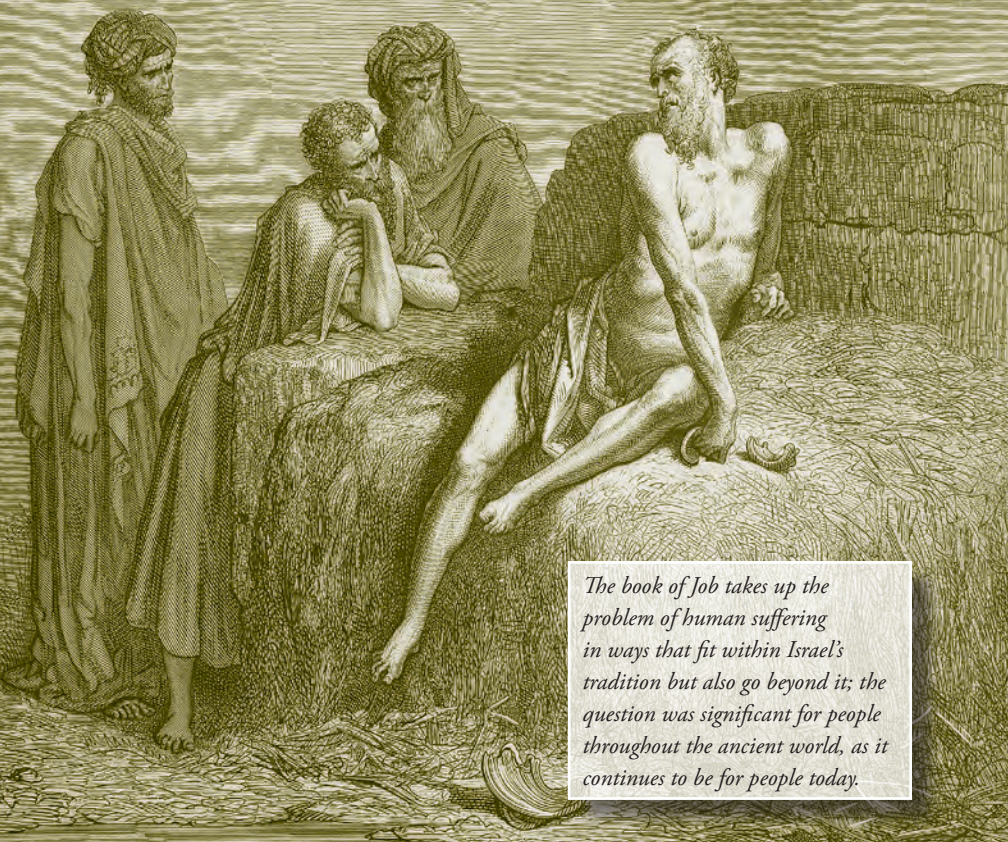
- ◆ Throughout Proverbs, we have the sense that people can take steps that will lead to a better and more satisfying life. But our second book, Ecclesiastes, challenges that approach. The writer of Ecclesiastes is a person who has been successful and achieved a good life yet finds it meaningless. The book is a stark and disturbing reflection on the emptiness of success.
- ◆ Ecclesiastes 1:2 states the theme: “Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher, all is vanity.” That word *vanity* is the traditional translation, but it is actually better to translate that key word as “pointless” or “meaningless.” The Hebrew word is *hebel*, which refers to vapor or breath. Life is like a puff of smoke that the wind blows away into nothingness.
- ◆ The book of Proverbs tells us to work hard to get ahead, but Ecclesiastes asks, “What do people gain from all the toil at which they toil under the sun?” The writer says that each generation is born, then dies and is forgotten. Verse 14 reads, “I’ve looked at everything that’s done under the sun, and I can see it’s all pointless. It’s chasing after wind.”
- ◆ In chapter 2, the author recalls that he spent his life doing the things he liked. He built houses and planted vineyards; he had livestock and gold. But in the end, he found that all his success was pointless because nothing lasts. All our striving adds up to nothing but a castle made of sand that is washed away by time.
- ◆ If everything is transient, and no successes have ultimate meaning, then how do we face life each day? Ecclesiastes responds with two points.
 - One is an attitude of acceptance that we belong to the ongoing cycle of life and death. This is reflected in the most famous part of the book (Eccles. 3): “To everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven.” The writer describes the endless cycle of life that God has created. God’s work will endure; ours will not. And accepting our own transience is essential.
 - The second point is that even if we can’t find ultimate meaning in things, we can have moments of satisfaction. Ecclesiastes 5:18 says, “It is fitting to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun, in the few days God gives us, for this is our lot.” This theme of finding

enjoyment in the moment appears at key points throughout the book, and the writer considers those moments to be genuine gifts from God.

- ◆ But interpreters of Ecclesiastes wonder where that leaves us. There are some who think the idea of finding joy in the moment is genuinely hopeful. They emphasize that finding satisfaction in the ordinary things of life really is a gift of God, and it makes life meaningful. But others see this as a kind of resignation. If you can enjoy things for a moment, that's good, because life has nothing more to offer.

JOB

- ◆ As we saw, the book of Proverbs teaches us that actions have consequences, which seems to mean that people who suffer must have done something wrong. But the book of Job challenges that line of thinking in ways that make it one of the most provocative books in the Bible.
- ◆ The opening scene of Job describes a world in which things make sense. We learn that Job is a good and deeply religious man, who has a good and prosperous life. But then, his world comes crashing down as Satan convinces God that he should test Job's character. Satan insists that if Job lost his family, wealth, or health, he would curse God to his face.
- ◆ God allows Satan to test Job with a series of tragic events. Job loses his livestock, his servants, his children, and his health. His wife tells him that he might as well curse God and die, because at least that would end his suffering. But Job continues to bear up and does not curse God.
- ◆ At this point, three of Job's friends show up, and for seven days, they sit with Job in silence because his suffering is so great. Finally, the debates begin as Job's friends try to make sense of what has happened.
 - The three friends operate with a worldview in which actions have consequences and God is just and fair. To make Job's suffering fit into that worldview, they argue that he must have done something to deserve it.
 - But Job's worldview centers on his experience of tragedy. He sees no correlation between actions and consequences. A person can do what is right



The book of Job takes up the problem of human suffering in ways that fit within Israel's tradition but also go beyond it; the question was significant for people throughout the ancient world, as it continues to be for people today.

and still suffer. He cannot see that God is fair and just. His suffering makes no sense at all.

- The dialogues between Job and his friends go on, with point and counterpoint. When Job's friends insist that suffering comes to those who do wrong, Job says that he sees wicked people thriving and good people suffering. Job is speaking now as a religious rebel, who challenges God to meet him in court, so he can finally have a fair trial and vindicate himself.

- When the three friends run out of arguments, a fourth friend named Elihu takes up their cause. He argues that Job may claim to be innocent, but no one can really claim to be innocent before God. Job claims that God is not fair, but Elihu insists that God is fair. If God sends suffering, the goal is that people repent and return to the ways of God.
- ◆ It's at this point that God finally breaks his silence. In Job 38–41, God speaks to Job out of the whirlwind, but he gives no answers or explanations. Instead, God replies to Job's questions with more questions, and he introduces a third perspective: Rather than trying to explain suffering, God reframes the issue and places it in a larger context.
 - Initially, God's questions seem to have nothing to do with Job's suffering at all. Instead, they draw Job out of a worldview that is defined by his own experience of loss and place him in the context of a world so vast that it defies his understanding.
 - God asks where Job was when the world was created, whether he understands the secrets of the sea or comprehends the origins of snow and rain. The point is that even as Job rails against God, the ocean waves continue to wash against shore, and dawn comes each morning. While Job denounces God's unfairness, God ensures that life goes on.
- ◆ At the center of Job's worldview is his experience of loss. But God describes a world in which human beings are not the defining element. These chapters give attention to all the wild creatures that God has made, none of which is particularly useful to human beings, yet God provides for them all. And Job himself belongs to that world. Strangely, he wouldn't be able to rage at God's unfairness unless God had given him the breath to do so.
- ◆ In the final chapter of the book, God blesses Job and restores his fortunes. But not even there do we find a satisfying explanation for all the suffering that Job endured. At some level, it remains incomprehensible—and that's essential to the story. When something tragic happens, people want an explanation. But the debates in the book of Job show that some situations defy all attempts at easy explanation. Instead of giving answers, the book enables people to live with the questions.

SUGGESTED READING

Crenshaw, *Reading Job*.

Murphy, *The Tree of Life*.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Ecclesiastes juxtaposes observations about the futility of life with the possibility of finding enjoyment in one's work. Do you discern genuine hope in this book, or is the message essentially one of resignation? What distinguishes those two attitudes?
2. The book of Job challenges common attempts to find explanations for suffering. The book shows how life goes on even as the questions remain unanswered. How is that approach helpful? What are its limitations?

ELIJAH, THE TROUBLER OF ISRAEL

In this lecture, we begin an exploration of the prophets of the Old Testament, starting with Elijah. As we follow Elijah's story, we will first see him defy the powers that be, then flee to the margins, where he hangs on by a thread. Next, he comes back to challenge the claims made about the god Baal, which the reigning king and queen of Israel used to support their regime. In the middle, Elijah faces a different kind of drama, when he must contend with his own sense of isolation and despair. Finally, he returns to challenge the abuse of power by the royal house before a whirlwind carries him off to an unseen realm above.

ELIJAH ON THE MARGINS

- ◆ At the end of 1 Kings 16, we learn that city of Samaria in the northern kingdom of Israel had become the capital, under the rule of a king named Ahab. Ahab had married a woman named Jezebel, who came from the city of Sidon. She and Ahab promoted the worship of the god Baal and the goddess Asherah, and this worship was seen as giving support to their regime. But in the eyes of such people as Elijah, the establishment of the cult of Baal was a betrayal of the faith that gave Israel its identity. It sparked conflict over the question of religious truth and the legitimacy of the government itself.
- ◆ The conflict came to a head over the issue of rainfall, of which Baal was the god. People believed that during the wet season of the year, Baal replenished the earth with the rain. In 1 Kings 17, Elijah issues a direct challenge to this idea. He speaks for the God of Israel and announces that the annual cycle of rain and dryness will stop, and there will be drought for several years. If people think Baal can make it rain on schedule, then Elijah will show them this is not the case.
- ◆ Elijah understands that his act of defiance puts him in opposition to the ruling power. Thus, he slips away to the region east of the Jordan River, just beyond the reach of Ahab and Jezebel. Later, he goes to the village of Zarephath, which

is in the north. This move is audacious, because that village is near Sidon, the hometown of Queen Jezebel.

- In Zarephath, Elijah meets an impoverished widow. This woman is gathering a few sticks to make a fire. All she has left is little flour and oil, with which she plans to make one last loaf of bread. After she and her son eat the bread, they'll starve.
- In response to this situation, Elijah makes an outrageous request. He tells her to share her bread with him because the God of Israel will replenish her flour and oil. The widow feeds the prophet, and she, in turn, is fed because the flour and oil don't run out.
- ◆ Soon, however, the widow's son becomes ill and stops breathing. The woman assumes that Elijah must have told God about some secret sin of hers and that God is now punishing her by killing her boy. But the prophet carries the boy to an upper room and prays that God will restore his life. The child revives, and the prophet gives him back to his mother.
- ◆ This story is told with a profound sense of irony. It pictures those who rule Israel investing everything in the cult of Baal, yet outside of Israel, in the region that was supposed to belong to Baal, the God of Israel is at work, giving life to a widow and her son. The ironic turn is subversive, because the widow, the outsider, proves to be more faithful than the insiders, who rule in Samaria.

ELIJAH AT THE CENTER

- ◆ In the second phase of Elijah's story, the action shifts from the margin of society to the center. In 1 Kings 18, Elijah challenges King Ahab to a contest. He wants all the prophets of Baal and Asherah to meet him on Mount Carmel. There, they will determine whose god can rightfully claim the allegiance of the people.
- ◆ Here again, Elijah is outrageous. The story pictures 450 prophets of Baal against one lone prophet of God. The contest is a challenge to Baal to send lightning from the sky to ignite a sacrifice. Elijah will ask God to do the same. Whoever answers by fire can truly claim to be God.

- ◆ The prophets of Baal call out and do a ritual dance around the altar, but there is no fire from heaven. As the hours pass, Elijah taunts them. His satirical comments bring no response from Baal, and neither do the prayers of his worshippers. The scene depicts Baal as an impotent deity, incapable of answering either his supporters or his detractors.
- ◆ Elijah then has people pour buckets of water over the sacrifice he's about to offer. Only then, when asking for fire seems hopeless, Elijah calls on God. And the response is dramatic. Lightning comes from sky, and the sacrifice is consumed by fire. The spectators immediately call out, "The Lord indeed is God; the Lord indeed is God."
- ◆ This is Elijah's moment of triumph, yet he manages to turn his stunning victory into defeat by overstepping his bounds. He has all the prophets of Baal herded down to the base of the mountain, where he slaughters them. The bloodbath ignites a new cycle of opposition, because Jezebel vows that Elijah will pay for it with his life. From triumph on the mountain, Elijah must flee again.

ELIJAH'S INNER STRUGGLE

- ◆ In the third phase of the story (1 Kings 19), the focus shifts from Elijah's struggle against the rulers and their gods to his own struggle against despair. This part begins with a journey from Mount Carmel in the northern part of the country to Mount Horeb or Sinai in the far south. Elijah enters the vastness of the desert alone. He tells God that he's ready to die, but he trudges on until he reaches Mount Sinai. There, he spends the night in a cave.
- ◆ God then speaks to Elijah, asking him why he is hiding out in the middle of nowhere. And the prophet has a ready answer: "I've been absolutely devoted to the Lord, the sovereign God. Because the Israelites have abandoned your covenant, torn down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. And now, I'm the only one left, and they want to kill me too."
- ◆ God responds to Elijah's tirade by telling him to stand on the mountain before him. When Elijah does so, a massive gust of wind shatters the rocks all around, an earthquake shakes the ground, and a blazing fire appears. Yet with each

spectacular display, we are told that God is not present. God is not in the wind, the earthquake, or even the fire. Instead, Elijah hears God speak in a still, small voice—a quiet whisper.

- ◆ God tells Elijah to go back north, toward Damascus, and anoint three people, who will orchestrate a military coup in the northern kingdom of Israel. The first new leader is Jehu, who will be king over Israel. The second is Hazael, who will be king over the neighboring region of Aram or Syria. And the third will be Elisha, the prophet who will take Elijah's place.
- ◆ Elijah has become convinced that everything depends on him, that he's the only responsible person left, but before he leaves the mountain, God tells Elijah that he's kidding himself. The prophet is so self-absorbed that he has overlooked the fact that he's not alone. There are thousands of people in Israel who have not adopted the ways of Baal.
- ◆ This is the climax of the middle phase of Elijah's story. Here, he's not confronted by the king, the queen, or the prophets of Baal but by his own God. Elijah is being summoned to move beyond the perspectives that have driven him into hiding in order to do the work to which he is called.

RETURN TO CENTER STAGE

- ◆ In the fourth part of the story (1 Kings 21), Elijah again confronts Ahab and Jezebel, this time, about the abuse of political authority. The scene is the town of Jezreel, where Ahab and Jezebel had a second palace. The man next door was named Naboth, and he had a vineyard that Ahab wanted to buy, but Naboth wouldn't sell.
- ◆ There seems to have been a clash of principles involved. The king thought that everything had its price, and you got what you wanted by paying people what they asked. But Naboth wouldn't sell the land because it belonged to his family.
- ◆ Ahab responds to the inability to get his way by sulking and pouting, but Jezebel comes on the scene, representing yet another set of principles. She believes that those in authority should get what they want. If Naboth won't sell the land, she

will manipulate the system so that she can take the land without paying for it. Jezebel fabricates a legal case against Naboth that ends with his execution. The moral of the story seems to be that might makes right.

- ◆ But Elijah pronounces a different moral. He warns that those who wrongly perpetrate violence will suffer violence themselves. Ahab and Jezebel have destroyed an innocent man, and they, in turn, will be destroyed. The final chapter of 1 Kings shows the grim truth of the prophet's warning.

ELIJAH'S DEPARTURE

- ◆ The final part of Elijah's story is told in 2 Kings 2. By this point, it's clear that Elijah's time has run out, even though his work is not complete. The still,



small voice had told him to anoint three people who would bring down the government, but Elijah has enlisted only one of them, the prophet Elisha. He has also warned that Queen Jezebel will come to a hideous end, yet she is still free.

- ◆ What's intriguing about this part of the story is that it's an ending that is not really an ending. In fact, Elijah's departure actually opens up the prospect of much more to come. Elijah and Elisha travel down to the Jordan River valley. As they walk together, a chariot pulled by horses made of fire comes charging across the landscape. Then, there is a great whirlwind that carries Elijah up to the sky until he vanishes from sight.
- ◆ There are many parts of Elijah's story that we might remember: his life on the margins and his flair for street theater; his anger at injustice and his penchant for self-absorption. But the most striking part of his story is the way it resists closure. Its ending holds the prospect of a new beginning.

SUGGESTED READING

Blenkinsopp, "Prophecy in the Northern Kingdom."

Hens-Piazza, *1–2 Kings*.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. A central theme in Elijah's story is his conflict with King Ahab and Queen Jezebel. What did the king and queen find so troublesome about the prophet? What did the prophet find so troublesome about the king and queen?
2. The middle section of Elijah's story tells of his journey to Mount Horeb (Sinai), where he voices an angry sense of isolation and despair. In what ways is the narrative critical of the prophet? In what ways might this episode enhance a reader's appreciation for the prophet?

JUSTICE AND LOVE IN AMOS AND HOSEA

In a classic study, the scholar Abraham Heschel called the biblical prophets “the most disturbing people who ever lived.” They see and feel things with an intensity that modern readers may find inexplicable. Heschel notes that we learn to take the world as it is. We know the world’s not perfect, but we get used to it. Yet the prophets speak as if the unjust treatment of the poor is a national catastrophe. They regard misguided religious practice as a disaster. And the explosive quality of the prophets’ words aims at what Heschel calls “a ceaseless shattering of indifference.” In this lecture, we’ll look at two of these prophets, Amos and Hosea, whose stories come first in Israel’s history.

AMOS

- ◆ The opening line of the book of Amos says that he was a shepherd who lived at the village of Tekoa, which was south of Jerusalem. But Amos preaches judgment against Israel, which was the kingdom to the north. What’s more, Amos lived at a time (about 760 B.C.) when things were relatively peaceful and prosperous, at least within Israel and Judah. That impression of prosperity would make it difficult for Amos to get a hearing.
- ◆ Chapters 1 and 2 show us the prophet’s rhetorical strategy. Amos initially condemns the sins of all the surrounding peoples. As he lists the hideous crimes that everyone else has done, he allows the people of Israel to feel superior. But then he strikes at the center—at Israel itself—pummeling the people for the injustice that is rampant in their own society.
- ◆ There are seven messages of judgment against other peoples, and each has the same form. First, the prophet condemns the violent actions that have been committed by each city or region. Second, he warns of the violent destruction that is coming because of those actions.

- The first city Amos condemns is Damascus, which lies to the north. In Amos 1:3, he tells us that the people there have threshed the neighboring region of Gilead with threshing sledges of iron. They have devastated the region to gain plunder, just as a sledge destroys the stalks of wheat to knock loose the grain. Because of that, the message warns that Damascus itself will suffer destruction in war, and its people will be taken away as captives.
 - In the messages that follow, Amos condemns the brutality of Gaza to the southwest and Tyre to the northwest. Both are indicted for their role in the slave trade. Amos says that both have handed over entire communities to Edom, which was to the southwest. And Edom is the next region condemned.
 - There are indictments of Ammon and Moab to the east and Judah to the south. But then, after pronouncing judgment against all those other peoples, Amos finally comes to the center of things: the injustice in Israel itself. In Amos 2:6, he says that the people of Israel “sell innocent people for silver, and needy people for a pair of sandals. They trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and they push those who are destitute out of the way.” Here, the prophet declares that the same kind of wrongdoing that listeners could see everywhere else was taking place in their own society.
- ◆ In chapter 5, Amos makes a scathing critique of the way people use the trappings of religion to cover up these social and economic abuses. He says that God rejects the festivals and offerings of Israel—a stunning idea given that these traditions were mandated. According to Amos, God also rejects the sacred music intended to honor him. The prophet’s words are rhetorically powerful, because if listeners hear that God does not want the festivals, the offerings, and the music, then they have to ask what God does want.
- ◆ And here, Amos speaks his most famous line. What God wants is to “Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” The prophet understands that God has a fundamental commitment to forming a society in which people are treated decently. Yet the callous indifference to human need that the prophet describes is crushing the vulnerable.
- ◆ What captured the attention of Amos’s listeners was not only his vision of a just society. It was also his warning of judgment, especially his warning about the coming collapse of the kingdom and the deportation of its people. In chapter 7,

he warns that the sanctuaries of the country will be destroyed and the royal house will fall by the sword.

- ◆ In response, one of the priests from the sanctuary at Bethel accuses Amos of conspiracy against the government and tells the prophet to return to the south. Amos reiterates that disaster is coming. A society that crushes its poorest members will eventually be crushed, and the people will be taken away into exile. That is, of course, what happened several decades later, when the armies of Assyria brought an end to the northern kingdom.

HOSEA

- ◆ In the book of Hosea, the focus shifts from issues of social justice to the problem of unfaithfulness to God. Hosea's basic assumption is that God loves his people deeply, yet he says that God is anguished because estrangement has occurred. Hosea shows us a God who feels outrage because he has been rejected, yet a God who wants nothing more than to be reconciled with those he loves.
- ◆ The opening chapter introduces the theme by involving Hosea in a public scandal: God tells the prophet to marry Gomer, a promiscuous woman, whose children will come from her adulterous relationships. The scene is intentionally shocking. To have Hosea marry someone who would sleep around with other men made a mockery of basic values. Yet the prophet was to live in this scandalous relationship to show how scandalous it was for God to have his people prove unfaithful to him.
- ◆ The underlying idea is that God's relationship with Israel involves mutual commitment. For Hosea, God showed his commitment by delivering his people out of slavery in Egypt and bringing them to the land of Canaan, as he had promised. That meant, in turn, that people were to be faithful to God. Yet Hosea lived in a context where it was common for people to participate in local cults, particularly that of Baal.
- ◆ In Hosea's eyes, worshipping Baal seemed to violate Israel's unique relationship with the God who delivered them from slavery. For him, that relationship was not one among many. It centered on a religious covenant that gave Israel its



The dominant form of local fertility cults centered on the god Baal, who was said to make rainfull (Baal's temple at Palmyra).

identity as a people. For Hosea, worshipping Baal was like having an extramarital affair. And just as sexual infidelity could end a marriage, religious infidelity could end Israel's covenant with the God of the Exodus. If that happened, Israel would no longer exist as a people.

- ◆ Hosea's task was to shock people by his marriage to Gomer. He could expect people to react to the scandal by asking how he could possibly allow the marriage to continue. The prophet could then ask how God could possibly allow his marriage with Israel to continue, given their infidelity.
- ◆ To underscore God's outrage at the situation, Hosea gives the three children in this family symbolic names. The first child is Jezreel, a name associated with a place of violence and destruction in Israel. The second child is Lo-ruhamah, which means "not pitied," and the third child is Lo-ammi, which means "not my people."

- ◆ Chapter 2 shows dramatic movement. It begins with divine outrage at Israel's infidelity in disturbing language. But it ends with the prospect of reconciliation and the hope that God's marriage with Israel can be restored.
- Hosea 2:2 sets the basic direction. It's a plea from God that Israel—his wife—give up her adulterous relationships. Change is what God desires. But starting



Hosea's portrayal of God as an outraged husband may evoke images of domestic violence, whether in the prophet's time or in our own.

in verse 3, the prophet depicts an explosion of feeling. God vents the rage that comes from a sense of betrayal, threatening to put his wife into the street.

- Rather than condoning domestic violence, the text here is assuming that the intensity of divine anger matches the intensity of divine love. God is outraged because the relationship matters, and he does not want to give up on it.
- ◆ But then, in chapter 2, beginning with verse 14, Hosea pictures God recognizing that anger can never win Israel back. If God wants the relationship to continue, he must speak tenderly to Israel's heart. Hosea says that God wants Israel to call him her husband once again. To enable people to do that, the prophet offers a vision of reconciliation. He pictures a context in which the cycle of violence ends and life is characterized by justice, love, and mercy.

ISRAEL AND ASSYRIA

- ◆ Hosea lived at the time when the Assyrians were expanding their empire. They initially dominated the area between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, in what today is the country of Iraq. But beginning in 745 B.C., they embarked on a campaign of military conquest. Over the next two decades, they conquered territory from the Persian Gulf in the east to the border of Egypt in the west. By 733 B.C., the Assyrians had captured most of the land in north and central Israel.
- ◆ Against this backdrop, Hosea 11 pictures God as the devoted parent of a rebellious child. The opening line says, "When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son." Yet the child took up with the wrong crowd and kept sacrificing to Baal. The more God reached out to him, the more the child rejected his parental love.
- ◆ Hosea expresses the heartfelt anguish of God. He pictures God as a parent, teaching the child to walk or tending to him when he was sick. The tragedy is that when Israel grew up, this child of God ran away and would now suffer the destructive consequences of his actions. Hosea says that the people will return to the land of Egypt, as if going back to slavery again. He explains that he means that Assyria will be their king.

- ◆ As he sees what is coming, God says, “How can I give you up, O Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel?” On the one hand, God can see that he must let his child’s rebellious actions take their course. Yet on the other hand, he can’t bear it, because doing so will be disastrous.
- ◆ The passage ends with a note of hope. The prophet can see that Assyria will conquer, yet he holds out the prospect of a future that extends beyond the disaster. He pictures God calling his rebellious child once again.

SUGGESTED READING

Heschel, *The Prophets: An Introduction*.

Simundson, *Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah*.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

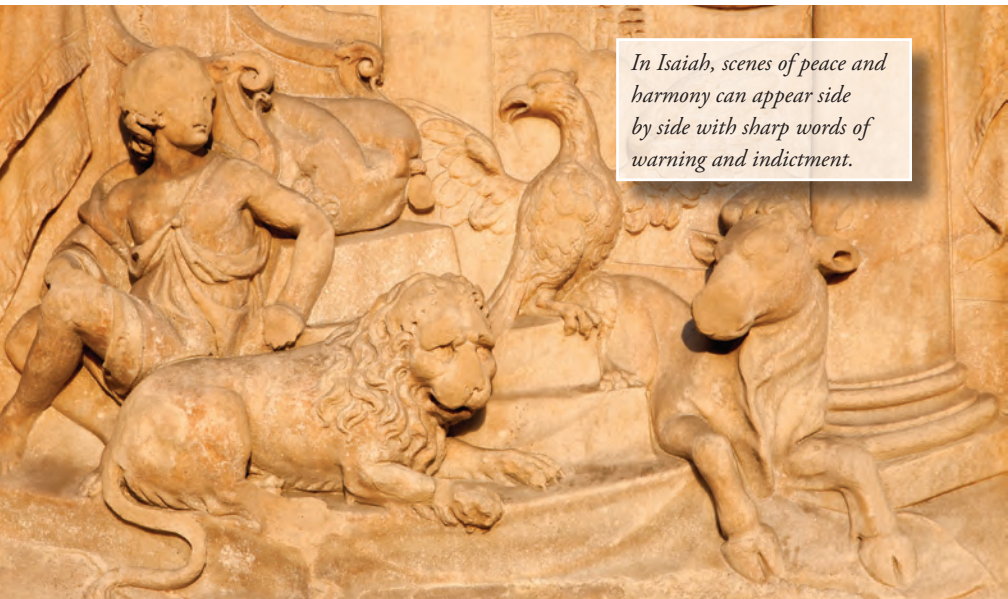
1. The lecture mentioned a number of reasons for people to reject Amos’s message. What were some of the reasons? Given the opposition he encountered, why might his message have been preserved?
2. Hosea depicts God’s relationship with people in terms of marital imagery. What aspects of that image seem most appropriate? What aspects seem most problematic?

ISAIAH ON DEFIANT HOPE

Isaiah is one of the most widely read prophetic texts in the Bible. It's rather long, and its contents are rich and varied, but perhaps the one feature that has contributed most to its popularity are its visions of hope. Of course, the book has scenes of outrage at injustice and hypocrisy, which in the prophet's eyes are destroying society. Yet the visions of hope also challenge the audience to resist the tendency toward despair—closing off the possibility of a different future. We will explore Isaiah 1–39, and as we proceed, we'll ask how hope relates to five aspects of the prophet's message: confrontation, purification, realism, passion, and vulnerability.

HOPE AND CONFRONTATION

- ◆ In chapter 1, the prophet Isaiah pictures God bringing a lawsuit against his own people, summoning heaven and earth to serve as his witnesses. God contends that he's been a dutiful parent, but his children have rebelled against him and acted corruptly; parent and children are now estranged.



In Isaiah, scenes of peace and harmony can appear side by side with sharp words of warning and indictment.

- ◆ Later in the chapter, the prophet gives us glimpses of the corruption that permeates society. He tells of those who pervert justice and of public officials who abuse their authority. Meanwhile, the weakest members of society suffer under their corrupt leadership. Those in authority have failed in their duty to care for orphans and widows.
- ◆ Isaiah also confronts religious hypocrisy. He says that people might bring countless sacrifices to the temple, but God doesn't want them. They celebrate all the religious holidays, but God detests the pageantry. They piously stretch out their hands in prayer, but God won't listen. In the prophet's eyes, offering incense to God can never be a substitute for fair treatment of other people. In this, Isaiah is much like Amos.
- ◆ The people who first heard Isaiah could presumably have told him that he lacked perspective. After all, the nation was in crisis and people in authority were focused on larger issues. Foreign armies were devouring territory all around, and Jerusalem seemed to be the one place still standing. Thus, the defendants in this court case might ask him, "Why worry about orphans and widows when national survival is at stake?"
- ◆ This is where Isaiah reframes the issue, insisting that the fact that Jerusalem has survived actually presents an opportunity. It's not that all the chaos means that God has abandoned Israel but just the opposite: In the face of chaos, God has preserved the city. And by doing so, he gives people the opportunity to change. That's why this opening lawsuit culminates when the prophet says that hope for the future calls for change in the present. For Isaiah, society must not only be preserved, but it must be worth preserving. And such a society must have justice at its heart.
- ◆ It is striking to read the account of God's indictment of his people in chapter 1 alongside the hope depicted in chapter 2. Here, Isaiah envisions a city that is no longer filled with corruption but is a center of learning. Nations no longer threaten to invade but come seeking knowledge. The vision climaxes when they "beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more."

- ◆ In its context in Isaiah, this vision of peace in chapter 2 is as confrontational as the lawsuit in chapter 1. Both passages challenge the destructive patterns of behavior that the prophet sees in his own society. Where the lawsuit identifies the need for change, the hope for peace identifies the direction. Isaiah had no reason to think his vision would be realized any time soon, but the image of nations turning swords into plowshares was designed to generate a restless dissatisfaction with the norm.

HOPE AND PURIFICATION

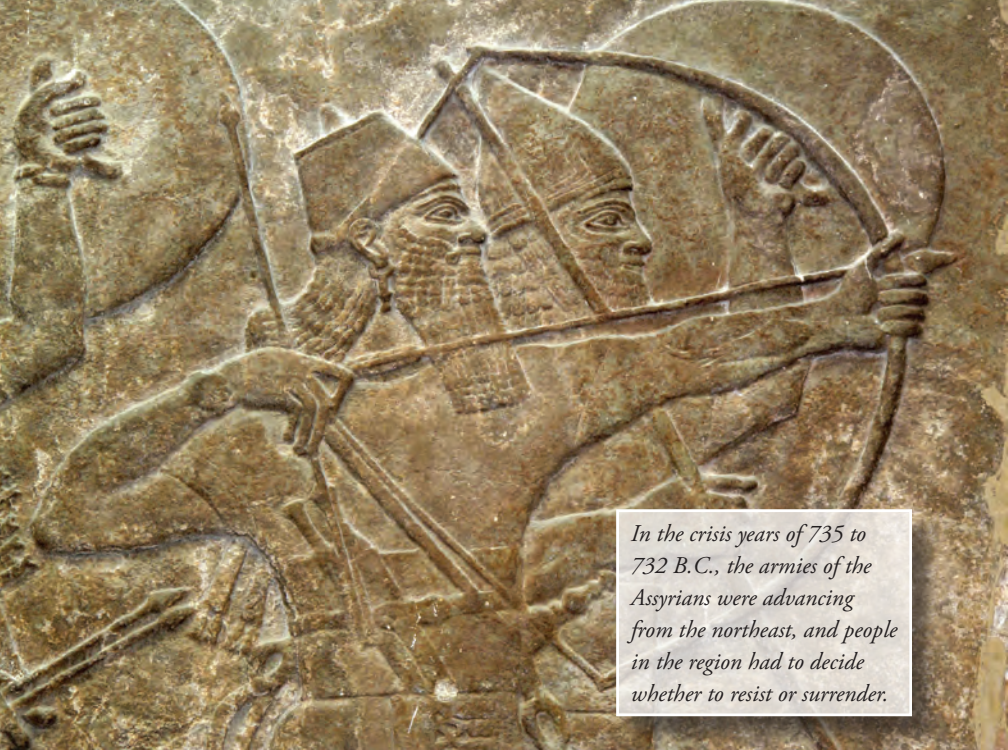
- ◆ The relationship of hope to purification is explored in chapter 6, where Isaiah receives his commission as a prophet. In this vision, he is confronted with the awe-inspiring holiness of God, who is seated on a throne in the temple. Above him are seraphim (Hebrew: “fiery ones”), each with six wings.
- ◆ The seraphim call out, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts. The whole earth is full of his glory.” As we’ve seen in previous lectures, God’s holiness is his “otherness.” It is the numinous quality that distinguishes God from all other beings. Holiness conveys absolute purity, intense power, and overwhelming majesty.
- ◆ The doorframes of the temple shake, and the entire sanctuary is filled with smoke. In this liminal moment, the magnitude of God’s presence makes Isaiah aware of his own smallness and vulnerability. God’s absolute purity makes him aware of his own impurity and the impurity of Israel. His uncleanness makes him unfit to stand in the presence of the Holy One, and it threatens to destroy him.
- ◆ Yet in the vision, Isaiah is not destroyed but purified. One of the seraphim touches Isaiah’s lips with a burning coal and tells him, “Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt is removed and your sin is purged away.” The element of hope lies in feeling the heat and being cleansed by it. That experience changes the prophet. When God asks who he should send to the people of Israel, Isaiah replies, “Here I am, send me.”
- ◆ Isaiah then learns that the experience of fire will take place on the national level. Israel itself will feel the heat of conflict. God sends Isaiah to deliver a message

that initially seems absurd. He is to tell the people, “Go ahead; keep listening. You’ll never understand. Go ahead; keep looking. You’ll never really see.” God explains that the prophet’s words will make them cover their ears and close their eyes, because if they understood what was happening, they would turn to God and be healed.

- ◆ These words were designed to function as a challenge. They’re meant to provoke people into replying that the prophet must be wrong, because they can understand. That’s why in chapters to come, the prophet will repeatedly call people to greater awareness of the situation. But when Isaiah asks how long he must persist in this work, God tells him he must do so until cities lie in ruins and houses stand empty; until the country has been ravaged and people have been sent away.
- ◆ Yet these ominous words conclude with a cryptic image that holds out the prospect of new life emerging from the ashes. Isaiah pictures the nation as a tree that has been cut down, yet the stump remains. And where there is a stump, there are roots underground. The image suggests that just as Isaiah was purified by fire yet survived, so, too, would the nation, which might be devastated but would live on.

HOPE AND REALISM

- ◆ We can see this idea developed in the next part of the book, chapters 7 and 8, which reflect a time when the Assyrian Empire was expanding. The kings of Syria and Israel—north of Judah—wanted to form a coalition to resist the Assyrian invasion, but King Ahaz, who ruled in Jerusalem, apparently refused to join them. Thus, they threatened to overthrow Ahaz’s government and replace him with a new king.
- ◆ The threat raises profound questions about the way hope relates to realism. Isaiah tells King Ahaz not to take any rash action and things will work out, but that does not seem realistic to Ahaz. The prophet underscores his message by referring to three children with symbolic names. His meaning is that Judah will survive the Assyrian attacks, at least for now.



In the crisis years of 735 to 732 B.C., the armies of the Assyrians were advancing from the northeast, and people in the region had to decide whether to resist or surrender.

- ◆ In these chapters, Isaiah offers a message of hope that is couched in brutal realism. He promises a future in which life continues, but it continues in the face of loss and suffering. Isaiah's perspective on hope doesn't negate the reality of the threat. Rather, he offers a way to live on in the face of the threat. In the years that followed, the Assyrian forces conquered Syria and Israel's capital, but Judah remained.

HOPE AND PASSION

- ◆ In chapter 9, Isaiah announces the coming of a day in which peace triumphs over war. He envisions a scene in which the boots and bloodstained clothes of battle are gathered up and destroyed. Then, he announces the birth of a child, a descendant of David, who will reign as king. His kingdom will be based on justice and righteousness, and in it, there will be endless peace.

- ◆ We have seen Isaiah depicting scenes of conflict and military invasion. And in that traumatic context, people had to wonder what God was doing. Thus, Isaiah's vision of hope identifies what he considers to be God's fundamental passion—his “zeal.”
- ◆ Isaiah lived in a situation that was deeply discouraging. But through his visions, such as that of the peaceable kingdom, the prophet insisted that God was not held captive by human conflict. Neither the Assyrians nor any other invading power could ultimately set the terms for the future. For Isaiah, God's passion was for a future in which the patterns of destruction would be overcome, and society would be reoriented toward human well-being.

HOPE AND VULNERABILITY

- ◆ Chapters 36 through 39 give us episodes from the latter part of Isaiah's career. Several decades have passed, and King Ahaz's son Hezekiah is now on the throne. He is described as a religious reformer, emphasizing the central importance of Israel's God.
- ◆ Hezekiah also asserted Judah's independence in the face of Assyrian domination. His political resistance triggered a violent countermove by the Assyrians, and their armies ravaged the country in 701 B.C. As the Assyrians closed in, their own records say that they had Hezekiah trapped in Jerusalem, like a bird in a cage.
- ◆ Chapter 36 begins with an Assyrian official traveling from the besieged city of Lachish to Jerusalem. There, he ridicules Hezekiah and demands that he surrender. Ultimately, the official becomes arrogant and insists that Israel's God is powerless to stop the Assyrian advance.
- ◆ In chapter 37, Hezekiah turns to Isaiah for help. He asks the prophet to pray for the remnant of the country that remains, and Isaiah sends back a word of assurance. As before, the king should take no rash action. The Assyrians will hear a rumor and return to their own land.
- ◆ Then, we find the prophet repeating the message of hope used earlier. The remnant that remains will send its roots deep into the soil and send shoots

upward to bear fruit. Jerusalem will be the center from which life will spring up again in the wake of devastation.

- ◆ Finally, the Assyrians withdraw and Jerusalem is spared. The country would survive for another century.

SUGGESTED READING

Clifford, “Isaiah, Book of.”

Tull, “Isaiah 1–39.”

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Many of Isaiah’s most famous visions use poetic imagery: wolves living peacefully with lambs, swords being turned into plowshares, the dawning of a new day. Why might readers find these poetic depictions of hope engaging?
2. At several points, Isaiah refers to God preserving a “remnant” of the people. In what kind of situation might that be heard as good news? In what kind of situation would it be heard as a threat?

JEREMIAH ON ANGUISH AND COMPASSION

In this lecture, we turn to the book of Jeremiah, which we might characterize with the word *pathos*—a profound depth of feeling. Pathos occurs at a point where love and anger, grief and longing all collide. The book of Jeremiah churns with the anger the prophet feels toward the faithlessness he sees in his society, yet it conveys the poignancy of love for a people seemingly bent on their own destruction. As we'll see, God tells Jeremiah that his message will be both critical and constructive. He will work to overthrow the illusions of entitlement and security that perpetuate unfaithfulness and injustice, yet he will also build up a vision of hope for the future.

THE PATHOS OF GOD

- ◆ Like many of the other prophets, Jeremiah was a poet, and chapters 2 to 4 of his book consist of poems about God's turbulent love affair with his people. For modern readers, the poems are something like the verses in a popular song. They tell of romance and betrayal, of unfaithfulness and desire. What makes Jeremiah's poetry different is that he takes the pathos from a human level to a divine level.
- ◆ In chapter 2, God wistfully remembers the old days, when love was young and sweet. The lyrics look back to when the people came out of Egypt at the time of the Exodus. They were like a young bride, setting out on a new life with her husband. Although life was hard, the people and God traveled through the desert together, and that made all the difference.
- ◆ But when God's people settled down, things started coming apart. The people got restless and went looking for other lovers. The pathos is heightened as God grieves over what has happened. He asks what was so wrong that his people went so far away from him.

- ◆ As the lyrics go on, God's grief turns to anger at this sense of betrayal, and by chapter 3, he is thinking of a "divorce." Here, Jeremiah is referring to people participating in fertility cults and acts of devotion to other deities. He portrays the people as a promiscuous wife, much as Hosea did on the same issue.
- ◆ In conveying the confrontational side of the prophet's message, however, the underlying sense of love doesn't disappear. Instead, it turns into God's longing for reconciliation, and that's where the constructive aspect comes in. In the last half of chapter 3 and the beginning of chapter 4, God asks "faithless Israel" to return.

THE SHATTERING OF ILLUSIONS

- ◆ If reconciliation between God and Israel is the goal, what would prevent that from happening? For Jeremiah, a major problem is that people are living with the illusion that nothing is wrong and their position is secure. He tries to shatter that illusion through his words and actions.
- ◆ A pivotal moment is a speech he delivers at the temple. Keep in mind that people understood the temple to be a visible sign of God's presence among them. Further, many assumed that as long as God was present, he would protect them; thus, the temple gave them a sense of security. But for Jeremiah, it is absurd to think that God will ignore unethical conduct simply because the people maintain the temple rituals.
- ◆ In chapter 7, Jeremiah delivers his Temple Sermon. He positions himself at the gate leading into the temple and calls out that the people must change their way of living. Not surprisingly, people entering the temple are annoyed.
- ◆ Jeremiah's initial argument fits the constructive side of his message. He says that if the people link ethical conduct to worship in the temple, things will be fine. But they must act justly with one another, not oppress the vulnerable, and not worship other deities.
- ◆ For the rest of the speech, the critical side of the message predominates. Jeremiah accuses people of treating the temple like a robbers' den. He pictures people engaging in all kinds of unethical behavior in daily life, then coming

Jeremiah's commission to prophecy is somewhat unsettling because he learns that his life is not his own; God has set him apart for purposes that are not of his choosing.



to the temple—where they think they are safe—as if their unethical behavior didn't matter. Jeremiah insists that it's nothing but an illusion to think that the temple provides cover for those who engage in unethical conduct elsewhere.

- ◆ Later, Jeremiah continues to shatter illusions by considering Israel's status as God's chosen people. Again, he challenges the idea that belonging to God meant the people were protected no matter what.
 - In chapter 18, Jeremiah uses the image of a potter working with clay for God's relationship to Israel. He says that if Israel's life has become misshapen—if social patterns have become warped—then God can take them through a process of collapse and rebuilding. Like the potter, God can shape the nation into a different form. Institutions can be pulled down and remade. And the image people have of themselves can be crushed and refashioned.
 - Of course, the texture of clay is variable, and the potter must respond accordingly. He must change his approach according to the nature of the clay. In the same way, God might start with a wonderful design in mind, but if people prove to be too resistant, then God will alter his plans and reshape society into a new form. If people begin to respond well, then God, too, will respond favorably and change.
- ◆ Both the Temple Sermon and the image of the potter and clay are intended to shatter the illusions of security that Jeremiah thought stood in the way of change. These passages include constructive elements, but the critical aspects are dominant, and reactions to Jeremiah's message are largely negative. In chapter 20, an official in the temple has Jeremiah arrested, beaten, and placed in confinement overnight.

THE PATHOS OF JEREMIAH

- ◆ The pathos of Jeremiah himself centers on his struggle with shame. That may seem surprising, because Jeremiah has seemed so strident in his public criticism of popular beliefs. But he is human, and shame is deeply connected to the human need to be valued. People typically do what will bring approval from those whose opinions matter to them and try to avoid being shamed or humiliated, because it brings a painful sense of losing one's value in the eyes of others.

- ◆ Jeremiah puts his pathos into the poetic form of a lament (Jer. 20:7–13), taking people on a journey from despair into hope. The opening lines here are a seething expression of anger and despair directed at God, because God has made Jeremiah's life miserable. Jeremiah appears to say that God has deceived him into serving as a prophet.
- ◆ In verses 8 and 9, Jeremiah says that he has dutifully spoken out against destructive social and religious practices, but people think he's laughable. He no longer wants to be a prophet. The problem is that his internal sense of calling persists.
- ◆ To be true to his convictions, he must overcome his shame. He needs a sense of purpose that comes from something higher than public opinion. And for Jeremiah, that's where God comes in. The poem pictures God as a warrior, doing battle for the prophet. It's Jeremiah's sense that God's truth will win out that enables him to continue speaking.
- ◆ However, there's another lament in verses 14 to 18, and it begins, "Cursed be the day that I was born." In this lament, there is no movement toward hope, only a relentless march into despair. Here, there is no word of praise at the end, only the haunting question: "Why did I ever come out of the womb, to see trouble and grief, and end my days in shame?" This poem gives no answer. It voices only the pathos.
- ◆ The juxtaposition of these two laments in chapter 20 shows us a life in which grief and hope exist side by side. The hopeful conclusion of the first lament does not silence the grief expressed in the second. But neither does the grief mean that hope has no place. Jeremiah's ability to engage both of them together marks the pathos of this prophet.

HOPE RISING FROM COLLAPSE

- ◆ This kind of tension persists in the final section of the book, which narrates the country's collapse yet asks how hope might rise from the ashes. In 597 B.C., the Babylonians raided the temple in Jerusalem and carried off sacred objects. They also deported some of the leading citizens, including the king, and replaced him with a king of their own choosing.

- ◆ In chapters 27 to 29, we learn that there were competing prophets, whose visions of hope were dramatically different. Some prophets said that despite the losses, the good times were coming back. The heart of their message was that no change was necessary. All people needed to do was resist any more Babylonian encroachments.
- ◆ But Jeremiah said the opposite. He envisioned a future in which his people would have to survive even as institutions collapsed. They would have to forge an identity that could persist in the absence of a temple, a king, or a country. His vision of hope was counterintuitive. He said that the way into the future was through acceptance, not resistance. He insisted that people should accept Babylonian rule, and that would allow them to survive.
- ◆ The Babylonians completed the process of conquest in 587 B.C. In the chaos that ensued, a group of people fled from Jerusalem to Egypt and forced Jeremiah to go with them. There, in Egypt, the prophet ended his career. He became a refugee.
- ◆ As the old world vanished, however, Jeremiah promised that the nation would survive. The identity of the people of Israel and Judah would continue, though

Jeremiah wore a yoke, like an ox, to make the point that people would find life by accepting loss; the old institutions were ending, and the only way forward was to shoulder a new reality.



the form of life that they knew would change. And in one of the most striking passages in the book (Jer. 31:31–34), he offers hope for the establishment of a new covenant.

- ◆ Jeremiah's vision for the future is not a simple extension of the past. He's keenly aware that unfaithfulness has been going on for generations, and if there is to be a future, the underlying pattern must change. The kind of change of heart that is needed will center on the act of forgiveness.
- ◆ Here, forgiveness means declaring that the past does not determine the future. The prophet insisted that the destructive patterns of the past had culminated in the breakdown of the nation, and people had to own that. But he also recognized that if the actions of the past set the terms for the future, then there was no future. Thus, in this passage, forgiveness is what creates the possibility of something new. It means declaring that the past need not determine the future. And for Jeremiah, such renewal would express the pathos of God's longing for reconciliation.

SUGGESTED READING

Brueggemann, *To Pluck Up, To Tear Down and To Build, To Plant*.

Stuhlman, *Jeremiah*.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. The book of Jeremiah offers a complex portrayal of the prophet. At what points did Jeremiah seem most willing to speak for God? What were the main reasons he struggled against God?
2. What aspects of Jeremiah's message did people of his own time find most objectionable? What aspects of his message might people have found most valuable in the years that followed the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem?

BABYLONIAN CONQUEST AND EXILE

The fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians in 587 B.C. was a pivotal moment in the story of the people of Israel and Judah. These events also raised larger questions about human responses to the trauma of loss, to which the Bible does not offer simple answers. In this lecture, we'll look at three perspectives that appear in writings from the period just before and after the fall of Jerusalem. First, the book of 2 Kings tries to explain the loss; second, Lamentations expresses the loss; and third, the book of Habakkuk offers a way through the loss, by finding a way to live with unanswered questions.

EXPLAINING LOSS: 2 KINGS

- ◆ The final episodes in the story of the monarchy in Israel are narrated in 2 Kings. Earlier, the books of Joshua and Judges told of Israel's movement from the desert into Canaan. Then, 1 and 2 Samuel recounted the establishment of the monarchy under Saul and David. The book of 1 Kings continued the story, from the brutal grandeur of King Solomon to the shattering of national unity under his son and the ongoing struggles of a divided kingdom. Now, 2 Kings brings the tale to its tragic conclusion, recounting the conquest of the northern kingdom by the Assyrians and the destruction of the southern kingdom by the Babylonians.
- ◆ The writings in this *Deuteronomistic history*, as it is known, use exclusive loyalty to Israel's God as the lens through which they interpret the rise and fall of the monarchy. They regard Israel's entry into the land of Canaan and the establishment of the Davidic dynasty as gracious acts of God. And they try to make sense of the tragic end of the northern and southern kingdoms by insisting that these events happened because Israel was unfaithful to God. Because they turned away from God, God handed the people over to the invading armies that destroyed their cities and took them into exile.

- ◆ We find this explanation in 2 Kings 17, which narrates the Assyrian victory over the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 B.C. At the time, that event seemed incomprehensible, because people believed they had been brought into that region by God. But they were forcibly uprooted, and the Assyrians brought in colonists from other nations to occupy the land.
- ◆ The book of 2 Kings explains that this happened because the people of the north had sinned against the God who had liberated them from slavery in Egypt. Although God had made a covenant with them, they rejected it by worshipping other gods. The writer insists that God had tried to restore the relationship by sending prophets, but the people refused to listen. And because they worshipped the gods of other nations, God allowed them to be conquered by another nation, namely, Assyria.
- ◆ The book uses the same perspective to explain the Babylonian triumph over the southern kingdom in 587 B.C. Here, the issues were even more complex, because people believed that God had chosen Jerusalem to be the capital. People wondered whether God had actually wanted to save the city and the temple but had failed.
- ◆ Chapters 23 and 24 insist that the fall of Jerusalem was God's judgment on the unfaithfulness of the people and their rulers, not his own failure. Because they had turned away from God by their idolatry, God turned away from them and brought in the Babylonians. When the destruction of the city is finally described in the last chapter, readers are to see it as a sovereign act of divine judgment on the sins of the people.

EXPRESSING LOSS: LAMENTATIONS

- ◆ The book of Lamentations also comes from the period after the fall of Jerusalem. But the writer challenges the attempt to make logical sense of the tragedy by allowing the voices of the victims to be heard. Lamentations consists of five poems, and one of its most distinctive aspects is the interplay of voices in the poems. These voices offer different perspectives on the experience of loss.

- ◆ For example, the opening chapter includes two voices. The first half of the poem is written in the third person, by someone who stands at a distance and makes observations about the tragic destruction of Jerusalem. The last half of the poem is written in the first person, by someone at the center of the devastation, who tells us what it feels like to be the victim.
 - The third-person observer's tone is gentle and sympathetic. He personifies the ruined city of Jerusalem as a woman, who "weeps bitterly in the night" and "has no one to comfort her." However, the observer assumes that the usual explanation for the tragedy of Jerusalem's conquest is accurate. As sad as it is, the city must have deserved destruction.
 - In the last half of verse 11, a different voice intrudes. Here, the victim herself begins to speak. As a challenge to these detached observations, she calls for a closer look at the magnitude of her suffering, and she pushes back against the idea that suffering can logically be explained as a fair punishment from God. The severity of the devastation calls into question any notion of justice.
 - As the poem concludes in verses 18 to 22, the woman brings the question of divine justice full circle. She concludes that she has been a rebel, but she also demands to know whether God has singled her out for special punishment. Clearly, the men who ravaged the city have sinned as much as she has. If God is as just as people say, then he should deal with the perpetrators of the violence in the same way he has dealt with her as the victim. The poem ends with these issues raised but left unresolved.
- ◆ The second chapter returns to the perspective of the observer, pressing the traditional explanation of suffering as punishment to the breaking point. In the first 10 verses, the image of a just God fades from view; instead, God is seen as the terrifying agent of destruction. The observer even calls God the enemy who slaughtered the people and ruined the temple.
 - Midway through the chapter, the victim's voice is heard again. Here, she confronts God with the appalling conditions of the siege that led to the city's fall. As the enemy surrounded the city, people were reduced to starvation, and some held on to life by eating human flesh. The woman accuses God: "You slaughtered them and showed no mercy."
 - In Lamentations, the enormity of the suffering defies explanation. The book's resistance to premature closure is one of its most important aspects,

yet it's also true that the poet's act of expressing grief may itself be a step toward healing. The content of the poetry is a raging mass of raw emotion that would fester like an infected wound if it never saw the light of day. The poetry expresses the pain in a form that begins moving through it.

FINDING A WAY THROUGH LOSS: HABAKKUK

- ◆ The book of Habakkuk takes up the issue of what it means to live in the face of unanswered questions. Habakkuk was written in the years just before the fall of Jerusalem, at a time when the country was plagued by internal social problems and corrupt leadership, even as the external threat of the Babylonian invasion was intensifying.
- ◆ The opening chapter of Habakkuk is a dialogue between the prophet and God. In verses 2 to 4, the prophet begins the dialogue by sounding the alarm about the corruption and lawlessness that are rampant in society. And he makes clear that God's apparent indifference to it all is a major part of the problem.
- ◆ In an attempt to wake up the sleeping deity, the prophet waves the daily news under God's nose. He points his finger at all the reports of destruction and violence, conflict and factionalism. It is astounding that God seems oblivious to it all.
- ◆ In verses 5 to 11, God tells Habakkuk that he plans to bring in the Babylonian army to deal with all the corruption in Jerusalem. Yet to the prophet, this only makes matters worse. What is especially incomprehensible is that in this part of the dialogue, God points out how brutally well-suited the Babylonians are for the task of destruction.
- ◆ In verses 12 to 17, the prophet protests that bringing the Babylonians against Jerusalem violates God's own principles. As the deity, God is not supposed to look on in silence while the wicked swallow up those who are more righteous than they are.
- ◆ At the beginning of chapter 2, Habakkuk compares himself to a guard who climbs up into a watchtower on a city wall. From that position, he waits to see

what kind of answer God will send him. God responds by telling him to write down a message on tablets. The message speaks of a vision that still awaits its time. But at present, the righteous live by faith.

- God's comment about the vision that awaits its time seems to anticipate what is said in the rest of chapter 2. There, the point is that those who perpetrate violence will become the victims of violence. The oppressors may now have the upper hand, but they will not endure forever. Thus, at present, the righteous live by faith.
- This is a turning point in the text. Here, the prophet learns that faith is not the answer to his questions. Rather, faith is a way of life. Although he could expect the oppressors to lose out in the end, how long that would take was completely unclear. In the prophet's context, the injustice remained real. And the more he tried to make sense of things, the more enigmatic they became.
- Habakkuk is unwilling to accept easy answers to difficult questions, yet he recognizes that one must also live on, despite the ambiguity. For Habakkuk,



Habakkuk's closing lines compare faith to the nimble movements of a creature who can negotiate barren landscapes and rocky slopes—a deer who moves surefootedly even in desolate and perilous places.

the alternative to faith is despair—and despair is ultimately debilitating. Thus, for him, faith is an act of defiance. It's his militant commitment to life in a situation that could drain life away.

- He puts this defiant hope into poetic form in the final lines of the book, where he pictures a world that apparently holds no promise for the future: “a fig tree [that] does not blossom,” “fields [that] yield no food.” It's a scene in which there is nothing that would warrant hope.
- Yet it's precisely at this point that the prophet voices his defiance in a new way. He faces all the reasons that would make a person despair yet refuses to capitulate. Instead, he continues, “As for me, I will rejoice in the Lord. I will joy in the God of my salvation. God, the Lord, is my strength.”

SUGGESTED READING

Hiebert, “The Book of Habakkuk: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections.”

O'Connor, “The Book of Lamentations: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections.”

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. The book of 2 Kings tries to identify reasons for the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple, the end of the Davidic monarchy, and the exile of the people. Why might people living after those events have thought it important to explain what happened? Can you think of modern analogies to such attempts to make sense of tragic events?
2. Lamentations and Habakkuk both respond to issues raised by the Babylonian invasion of Jerusalem. How are their perspectives similar to each other? How are they different?

EZEKIEL ON ABANDONMENT AND HOMECOMING

In this lecture, we consider the prophet Ezekiel, who was deported from Jerusalem during the first wave of the Babylonian invasion of Judah in 597 B.C. Over the next 10 years, while Jeremiah prophesied in Jerusalem, Ezekiel worked among the people in exile. When Jerusalem was destroyed in 587 B.C., Ezekiel stayed among the exiles in Babylon for another 15 years, an experience that gave him a profound sense of dislocation. Given this sense, we'll read the book with two themes in mind: abandonment (Ezek. 1–32) and homecoming (Ezek. 33–48).

VISION OF GOD ON A CHARIOT

- ◆ According to the first verse of Ezekiel, one day, when the prophet was 30 years old and was working among the exiles, the heavens were opened and he saw visions of God. For modern readers, the scenes that follow are surreal, even bizarre. But for ancient readers, they were explosive, threatening to overwhelm people with their descriptions of the numinous presence of God.
- ◆ The prophet's vision begins when he feels a surge of wind. He sees a cloud glowing with light approach and repeated flashes of lightning. Then he sees four creatures, the likes of which exist nowhere on earth. Each creature has four wings, and under the wings are human hands. Their legs are straight and their feet are like the hooves of a calf. Each creature also has four faces—that of a human, a lion, an ox, and an eagle—each looking in a different direction.
- ◆ Ezekiel pictures the bizarre creatures pulling a chariot, which serves as God's throne. In this vision, the chariot has not two but four wheels—one for each creature. And as the creatures rise up from the earth, the wheels rise up along with them. Above the creatures is a dome that shines like crystal and a throne that looks like a jewel. And on the throne is a figure who burns like fire and is surrounded by a rainbow.

- ◆ As we said, Ezekiel had a profound sense of dislocation. He was far from home and the temple, where God was understood to be present. Thus, it's remarkable that God comes to the prophet while he's in exile. The point is that God has not abandoned those who have been deported. He is present with them. That's why the wheels of the chariot are so important: God is not confined to the temple in Jerusalem. He is quite capable of movement. In a sense, Ezekiel revitalizes the older tradition of God traveling with the people.
- ◆ Ezekiel's initial vision of the throne-chariot culminates when he's given the task of prophesying to people who don't want to hear what he has to say. In chapters 2 and 3, God hands Ezekiel a scroll, with words of lament, grief, and woe written on both sides. The prophet is told to eat the scroll, which he does, taking the message into himself. In the chapters to come, he communicates that message of lament, grief, and woe in visions that would certainly have provoked opposition.
- ◆ Chapters 8 to 11—spoken to the exiles but set in the period before the fall of Jerusalem—give a vivid sense of the ominous side of Ezekiel's message. Sitting among the exiled leaders, Ezekiel warns that as the people have abandoned God by their idolatry, God will abandon Jerusalem to foreign invasion. Then a strange being, who is blazing with fire, appears and grabs Ezekiel by the hair; in a vision, he is transported to the temple in Jerusalem.
- ◆ In the temple, Ezekiel sees four examples of people abandoning God by idolatry, including one of a group worshipping the sun. As this vision continues, it will warn that because people have abandoned God for foreign deities, God will abandon Jerusalem and its temple to foreign armies.
- ◆ In chapter 9, the prophet envisions a scene of slaughter that is both horrific and surreal; only those who refuse to share in Israel's idolatry are spared. The scene is so terrible that Ezekiel himself must protest. He asks how God can call for such wholesale destruction, but God refuses to stop. Ultimately, God's chariot rises up from the temple, a sign that he is abandoning his sanctuary.
- ◆ This section seems to set up a clash of perspectives. On the one hand, it has a kind of ruthless logic: God abandons the city where the people have abandoned him. The people must accept this judgment because it's the will of God. On the



Ezekiel came from a family of priests yet had been forcibly separated from the temple, adding to his sense of dislocation from Jerusalem.

other hand, the prophet can't accept it; he must protest. It's unconscionable to think that God would act in this way. He has to wonder how such carnage can really be the will of God.

THE SHEPHERD AS A LEADER

- ◆ In Ezekiel 33:21, the prophet receives word that the city of Jerusalem has fallen. But once the worst has happened, he can now see things from a different angle. Instead of construing the tragic events as divine punishment, he can see them arising from the failures of human leadership. Here, he focuses on the fact that the self-serving practices of people in authority had brought about these devastating consequences. In light of that reframing of the issue, the new question is how God will respond to human failure and how God's commitment to the renewal of life and well-being will take shape.
- ◆ Chapter 34 introduces this remarkable change in perspective by using the image of a shepherd. In the ancient world, this image was a common metaphor for a king or other leader, who both protected and disciplined his flock. The book of Ezekiel uses the shepherd metaphor to offer a pointed critique of the failures of leadership in Israel.
- ◆ In the opening lines, Ezekiel reports that God has castigated the leaders of Israel, who have used their positions to enrich themselves while neglecting the welfare of others. God compares them to shepherds who eat the fat, take the wool, and slaughter the sheep for their banquets but fail in their duty to care for the flock. Because of their failure, much of the flock has been devoured by predators, and the survivors have been scattered across the earth.
- ◆ This image represents a different perspective on what has happened to Ezekiel's people. The nation is being punished not because the people have turned away from God, but because the self-serving practices of Israel's kings have impoverished it. Their political decisions have left the country vulnerable to destruction. As they have remained preoccupied with themselves, their people have either fled as refugees or been forcibly deported.
 - In response, God identifies himself as the true shepherd. In verses 11 and following, he says that as the shepherd, he will gather those who have been

displaced because of human conflict and care for those who are impoverished. This vision reshapes perspectives on God's role.

- Finally, the vision assumes that these commitments to protect, feed, and heal the people will take political form. In verse 23, God says that he will appoint for them a single shepherd, his servant David, and this figure will provide for them and guide them.
- Ezekiel assumes that God's commitment to the well-being of the people must come to expression in leadership. Otherwise, it remains mere wishful thinking. This creates a tension. The prophet is keenly aware that leaders are fallible, yet he knows that leadership is needed. Instead of abandoning the notion of leadership, he envisions its renewal through a Davidic king, who will put the ideals of good shepherding into practice.

VISION OF THE DRY BONES

- ◆ There was no dawning of a new golden age in Ezekiel's time. Any movement toward renewal fell short of the ideal. Yet Ezekiel pressed the question of what it would mean for a shattered and displaced people to be restored. In doing so, he provided what is probably the best-known part of his book: the vision of the dry bones.
- ◆ This scene appears in chapter 37, and it has captured people's imaginations for centuries. The prophet has a vision in which he sees a valley filled with bones. Then God asks a question that initially seems ridiculous: "Can these bones live?" Obviously, the bones are lifeless. Yet God answers his own question by telling Ezekiel to prophesy to the bones. Ezekiel is to tell the dry bones that God will cause breath or spirit (Hebrew: *ruach*) to enter them and give them life.
- ◆ Ezekiel hears a rattling sound as all the bones that are scattered over the ground come together to form skeletons. Then, the skeletons are then covered with flesh and skin. Finally, a surge of wind comes and fills them all with breath or spirit, so they can live.
- ◆ As strange as it is, in Ezekiel's context, the vision addressed a serious problem: the profound sense of abandonment that was felt by people in exile. In verse 11, Ezekiel is told that the dry bones symbolize the whole people of Israel, for whom the movement into exile felt like going to an early grave.

- ◆ This vision counters that sense of despair with the prospect that God will revitalize their lives and bring them back to their land. The prophet offers hope to a people who have lost hope, and that hope takes the form of national renewal. The prospect of the bones coming to life gave the exiles a way to imagine that they had a future, and that future included the promise of coming home.

HOME COMING

- ◆ In chapter 40, we are told that 14 years have now passed since the temple was destroyed. Its ruins are like the dry bones, lying on the ground. But Ezekiel has a vision that transforms that perspective. He sees a man whose appearance is like shining bronze. The man has a measuring rod in his hand, and he takes Ezekiel on a tour of a restored sanctuary. Ezekiel depicts a sanctuary that is characterized by perfection. Earlier, the temple was a corrupt place of idolatry; now, it is pure and holy. The change conveys hope for a transformed future.
- ◆ Another key element in this section concerns the presence of God, who returns on his chariot in chapter 43 and whose glory fills the temple. This is a vision of God's homecoming, and it is crucial for Ezekiel. It enables him to say that the threat of judgment is real yet is not final. What has happened does not close off the future.

SUGGESTED READING

Clements, *Ezekiel*.

Petersen, "Ezekiel."

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Ezekiel communicates through surreal images, such as the movements of the throne chariot and the dry bones being restored to life. Why might people of his time have found such imagery engaging? Why might they have found it difficult to understand?
2. In the first half of the book, Ezekiel portrays God as unrelenting in judgment. In the second half, he depicts God as a compassionate shepherd. What is the effect of including these contrasting images in the same book?

JEWISH IDENTITY AND REBUILDING AFTER EXILE

In the year 539 B.C., the Babylonians were defeated by Cyrus II, king of Persia. The people who had been exiled from the region of Judah were simply one small group in the vast Persian Empire, but their lives and outlook were changed dramatically by Cyrus's conquests. As we will see, some of them suddenly had the opportunity to return to Jerusalem and rebuild their society. But what did that mean in this new political context? And what did it mean for their identity as a people? In this lecture, we'll look at the question of identity from two perspectives: Israel's distinctiveness in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah and its engagement with outsiders in Jonah.

REBUILDING THE TEMPLE

- ◆ Earlier, we saw how the people of Israel's identity was tied to worshipping the God who delivered their ancestors from slavery in Egypt. The prophetic writings reflected the ongoing struggle to reaffirm the uniqueness of that covenant with God, who is different from the gods of other nations. That same emphasis continues in Ezra and Nehemiah.
- ◆ The book of Ezra begins with Cyrus issuing a decree allowing the people to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple. As we'll see, throughout Ezra and Nehemiah, the Persians are pictured as rulers who play a supportive role in the renewal of Jewish life. This reflects a new way of conceiving Jewish identity—as something that can flourish under a foreign power.
- ◆ Once Cyrus's decree has been issued, a group travels from Babylon to Jerusalem to start the rebuilding. The writer sees this group as the nucleus of the revitalized Jewish community in Jerusalem.

- ◆ The groups starts by building a new altar on the foundation of the old one, offering sacrifices, and celebrating traditional holidays. The altar, the sacrifices, and the festivals all give this returning group a clear sense of identity. They are the bearers of Israel's distinctive tradition.
- ◆ Things go well for a while, but then trouble begins, centering on the issue of identity. In chapter 4, a group of people who have been in the region for some time ask if they can join the newcomers in rebuilding the temple. This group consists of people whose ancestors were foreigners, having been brought into the region by the Assyrians many generations before. They, too, worship the God of Israel.
- ◆ But the returning group doesn't like the idea. They believe that the descendants of the foreign settlers continue to worship their own ancestral gods alongside the God of Israel. Do the two groups have enough in common to build a joint house of worship, or are the differences significant enough that they can't work together and maintain their integrity?
- ◆ In Ezra 4, the returnees decide that building the temple is not a case where shared effort is possible. They see too many differences between their group and the others. Their refusal to cooperate prompts the other group to retaliate. If they can't participate in the rebuilding, then they'll try to stop it. Ultimately, the new temple isn't completed until 515 B.C., more than two decades after Cyrus authorized the rebuilding.

FOLLOWING THE LAW

- ◆ Another factor that shapes a distinctive sense of identity is the Law of Moses. In Ezra 7, almost six decades have passed. The year is now 458 B.C., and again, a Persian monarch plays a positive role in renewing Jewish life. King Artaxerxes II authorizes Ezra, a Jewish scribe, to return to Jerusalem to teach people the Jewish law and to ensure that they obey both the Jewish law and the law of the Persian king. This reflects the Persians' belief that the best way to run an empire was to give people a certain amount of local autonomy.

- ◆ Ezra's role marks a shift from the pattern that was in place under the Babylonians. Before the exile, the people of Judah were governed by their own king and their own law. But when Jerusalem fell, the Davidic monarchy ended; what remained was a form of Jewish law, which will be implemented by a scribe.
- ◆ Ezra returns to Jerusalem, where he is confronted with an issue of law and identity. He is told that some of the men have married non-Jewish wives, and he is convinced that these marriages threaten the community's ability to maintain its distinctive identity.
 - In chapter 9, Ezra tells God that he understands that mixed marriages are a violation of the law's command to remain separate from other nations. He takes the draconian step of requiring people to divorce their foreign wives and send away their children. For him, maintaining a sense of identity requires breaking up families that seemed to compromise Israel's distinctiveness.
 - In Nehemiah 8 to 10, Ezra has people gather in an open plaza near one of the city gates, where he reads the law to them and where others can provide commentary. This scene contains many elements that characterize synagogue services of later generations, including the reading of the law and



Ezra is seen as one of the great shapers of Jewish tradition; his reading of the law reflects many elements of synagogue services that are still practiced today.

commentary. These same basic actions have been done repeatedly as people gather in their synagogues. Thus, many now remember Ezra as the one who defined Jewish identity around the centrality of Jewish law.

- If we follow this theme into Nehemiah chapter 10, attention continues to focus on the community's distinctiveness. Commitment to the law means not intermarrying with outsiders, observing the weekly Sabbath day, and paying for sacrifices to be offered in the temple. In the vast expanse of the Persian Empire, this community can say that it has an identity that is distinctively shaped by the Law of Moses.

REBUILDING THE WALLS

- ◆ Nehemiah, a Jewish man, is a servant of the Persian king. In chapter 1, he is in the Persian city of Susa, and the year is about 445 B.C. Some travelers tell Nehemiah that despite all the efforts at rebuilding, the walls of Jerusalem are still in a shambles, which Nehemiah regards as shameful. Walls were important for protection and to give a city a sense of grandeur. To live among ruined walls was a disgrace; thus, Nehemiah is determined to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem.
- ◆ The Persian king authorizes the project and allows Nehemiah to lead another group back to Jerusalem to begin the work. But when he arrives in Jerusalem, conflict breaks out almost immediately. The officials who govern the Persian provinces surrounding Jerusalem are highly critical of the project, which they see as a dangerous act of self-assertion. They accuse Nehemiah of strengthening the city's defenses to achieve greater political independence and more influence. They begin a campaign of harassment to stop the rebuilding.
- ◆ The efforts to halt the project involve the threat of attack against the workers, but Nehemiah establishes successful defenses, and by the end of chapter 6, the project is complete. To increase the population, the nearby towns and villages send 10 percent of their people to live in Jerusalem. Then, in chapter 12, there's a festival to dedicate the walls. This well-defined and well-protected city now helps the community assert its own unique place within the empire.

ENGAGING WITH OUTSIDERS

- ◆ The books of Ezra and Nehemiah tell the story of a people set apart from other nations, which can be a positive development. But the impulse to assert one's distinctive identity can also create a community closed in on itself. The writer of Jonah recognizes this problem and emphasizes that the other side of the people of Israel's identity is to engage with, and seek the well-being of, other nations.
- ◆ The book of Jonah offers a humorous critique of people who are so self-absorbed that they seem oblivious to the needs of others. The main character in the book is the prophet Jonah, who lived centuries before the time of the rebuilding of Jerusalem under the Persians. But in this story, he mirrors the self-absorbed attitudes that the writer sees in people of the Persian period.
- ◆ The story begins when God tells Jonah to go to the east, to prophesy against the wicked city of Nineveh, which had once been the capital of Assyria. Instead of obeying God, Jonah books a ticket on a boat going to Tarshish—in the opposite direction.
- ◆ God brings up a great storm that rocks the boat and throws all the sailors into a panic, but Jonah remains sound asleep. The sailors finally wake him up and tell him to pray, but Jonah doesn't bother. Playing the martyr, he tells the sailors to throw him overboard to placate God.
- ◆ The sailors row the boat even harder, trying to save Jonah and themselves. But when the storm gets worse, they redirect their prayers to Jonah's God and agree to throw the prophet into the sea. When they do so, the sea becomes calm, and the sailors offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving to Israel's God. These former pagans actually prove to be much more devout than the prophet himself.
- ◆ Of course, God saves Jonah from drowning by sending a huge fish to swallow him up, and for three days, Jonah stays in the belly of the fish, giving thanks to God. All of chapter 2 is a prayer that exudes gratitude for God's help in this time of need. But we'll need to see how long Jonah actually persists in this attitude of thanks.

- ◆ In chapter 3, the fish spits Jonah out onto the shore, and the prophet finally goes to Nineveh as commanded. He trudges into the middle of town and utters a single sentence: “Forty days more and Nineveh will be overthrown!” Immediately, everyone in the city of Nineveh repents.
- ◆ God responds positively and decides not to bring judgment against the city after all. But Jonah is outraged. He is grateful that God has been merciful to him but outraged that God would be merciful to others. He stomps out of the city in disgust.
- ◆ God is taken aback by Jonah’s narrow-mindedness. As the prophet sits outside Nineveh, hoping that God might change his mind and blast the city in judgment, God has a shady plant grow over Jonah’s head to shield him from the sun. Again, Jonah is grateful. But when the plant dies the next day, Jonah sits in the heat and returns to his martyr complex.
- ◆ Again, God is taken aback. He asks how Jonah can be so upset about a plant that gave him the comfort of a little shade, yet he refuses to let God be concerned about the welfare of an entire city full of people and animals. And that’s where the book ends: with a question that’s left for readers themselves to answer. Shouldn’t we seek the welfare of people everywhere, even those outside our own communities?

SUGGESTED READING

Blenkinsopp, *Ezra–Nehemiah*.

Limburg, *Jonah: A Commentary*.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Ezra and Nehemiah focus on the temple, the law, and Jerusalem’s walls. Why did the writers see such an urgent need to reestablish each of these three things after the exile?
2. The book of Jonah uses humor to critique the self-absorbed attitudes that have become a problem. Why draw out the aspect of humor instead of offering a direct criticism, as many prophetic writers did?

ESTHER, DANIEL, AND LIFE UNDER EMPIRE

The books of Esther and Daniel tell stories of life under the Persian Empire and the Hellenistic or Greek empires that followed. They show the schemes of the high and mighty being subverted and the vulnerable winning out in the end. At this time, the Jewish people were a small minority of these vast empires' populations. Some of them had returned to Jerusalem, while others had stayed in Babylon and other regions ruled by the Persians. Wherever they were, they needed to make lives for themselves, with hope and encouragement, at a time when they were subject to the whims of those in power. The books of Esther and Daniel suggest how they did so.

ESTHER AS QUEEN

- ◆ The Persian rulers saw themselves as dignified and authoritative, but the Persian king in the story of Esther is not too bright. He repeatedly has other people tell him what to do, and his decisions are often ludicrous. The king's primary adviser is the wicked Haman.
 - By way of contrast, a truly noble figure in the story is a Jewish man named Mordecai, who lives among the exiles under Persian rule. Mordecai has adopted his cousin Esther, who is an orphan, and raised her as his own daughter. He will foil the evil schemes of Haman and seek the welfare of his own people.
 - Esther herself is beautiful, and she rises from the status of commoner to become queen of the empire. She shows wisdom and courage and uses her powerful position to save those who are threatened. Esther's story shows that even under domination by a foreign power, ordinary people may do great things.
- ◆ In the first scene, the king of Persia holds a great banquet and commands his wife, Vashti, to make an appearance to allow everyone to see her great beauty. But his wife refuses to come. The king's advisers warn that Vashti's refusal to



The plot of the book of Esther begins with a festive Persian banquet and ends with the Jewish festival of Purim; in between, the villain Haman devises one wicked scheme after another.

obey could turn into a national crisis, because women everywhere might start disobeying their husbands. To guard against this threat, the king banishes Vashti from his presence and decrees that men are to be masters in their own houses.

- ◆ The king's aides quickly begin searching for a new queen. One of the candidates is Esther, who keeps her Jewish identity a secret. When she is brought to the king, he immediately falls in love with her, and she becomes the queen.
- ◆ This extraordinary turn of events helps the king in ways he didn't anticipate. We learn that two of the king's servants are planning to kill him, and Esther's adoptive father, Mordecai, hears about the plot. He tells Esther about it, she warns the king, and the king has the would-be assassins put to death. Mordecai has saved the day, and his noble deed is written down in the royal records.

- ◆ The plot thickens when the king's adviser, Haman, demands that everyone in the kingdom bow down to him, but Mordecai refuses to do so. Haman vows to retaliate by slaughtering not only Mordecai but all the Jews in the empire. To pick a day for this horrible deed, he rolls a set of dice (*purim*), which tell him to slaughter the Jews on the 13th day of the month of Adar.
- ◆ Haman convinces the king to go along with the proposed genocide, and a decree is issued, calling people to slaughter the Jews on the appointed day. When word gets out, Mordecai calls on Esther to try to influence the king to stop the slaughter.
- ◆ In the final scene in the first half of the book, Esther invites both the king and Haman to a banquet. The king is so pleased with her that he offers to give Esther whatever she wants in return. She replies that she will make her request at a second banquet for the king and Haman the next day. Haman is delighted that he is included in all this with the king, but he's still outraged by Mordecai's refusal to show reverence toward him and plots to have him hanged.

ESTHER'S SECOND BANQUET

- ◆ The second half of the book starts when the king learns for the first time that Mordecai once saved his life; in turn, the king determines that he must honor Mordecai. He consults Haman on this subject, who assumes the king is planning to honor him. Haman proposes having the honoree ride through the streets on the king's horse, wearing royal robes. Delighted, the king tells Haman that he should do all this for Mordecai. Haman is furious, but he is trapped. Now he must honor Mordecai instead of demanding that Mordecai honor him.
- ◆ Next, Esther hosts her second banquet for the king and Haman. There, she reveals that she is Jewish and that Haman is plotting to kill her people. Haman panics and throws himself onto Esther's couch to plead for his life. But when the king sees this, he thinks Haman is assaulting the queen, and he has Haman hanged.
- ◆ Then, the king gives the Jews the right to defend themselves. Thus, when the enemies of the Jewish people are set to attack them on the day that Haman selected, the Jewish people strike first and win. Instead of disaster, there is

victory. The festival of Purim is established to commemorate the day when sorrow turned into gladness.

- ◆ One of the intriguing dimensions of this story is that God is never mentioned—at least not in the Hebrew text. This reticence about God’s role recognizes the fact that for many people, the experience of God is more ambiguous than a lightning bolt in the sky. Given that ambiguity, they find it difficult to speak about divine activity with any certainty. Instead, Esther shows the value of human initiative.

THE FIERY FURNACE

- ◆ The book of Daniel has two main parts. Chapters 1 to 6 tell stories about a Jewish sage named Daniel and his associates, who must deal with the whims of those who rule the empire. Chapters 7 to 12 recount visions of conflicts that will lead to the demise of the Babylonian, Persian, and Greek empires and the final coming of the kingdom of God.
- ◆ The stories in Daniel, like those in Esther, poke fun at the high and mighty. The rulers of the empire may think they impress others with their power and wealth, but these stories playfully undermine the kings’ pretensions through the use of humor. A good example is the story of the fiery furnace in chapter 3.
- ◆ In this story, the Babylonian king made a golden statue that stood 90 feet high and summoned all his administrators and officials to worship the statue. If they refused, they would be thrown into a furnace blazing with fire. Throughout these scenes, the writer uses long lists and repetition to show the extent of royal pomposity.
- ◆ Three of Daniel’s friends, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, refuse to bow down to the golden statue and are thrown into the furnace. The fire is so hot that the guards who throw the men into the furnace are killed by the heat. But when the king looks in, he sees the three men walking around in the flames; with them is a mysterious fourth figure, who has a godlike appearance.
- ◆ The king calls out to the three men, who come out of the furnace, which they’ve survived unharmed. Then, the king says, “Praised be the God of Shadrach,

Meshach, and Abednego, who sent his angel and rescued his servants who trusted in him. They disobeyed the king's command, and yielded up their bodies, rather than serve and worship any god except their own God." The king's pretensions have led him to humility and understanding.

- ◆ On one level, this is an entertaining story of danger and deliverance that comes to a happy ending. But on another level, the story can make a serious point. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego "yielded up their bodies" by disobeying an unjust decree of the state to obey the higher authority of God.
- ◆ The biblical story makes clear that the men hoped that God would preserve them through the struggle, but it also notes that they had no guarantee God would do. Before the happy ending, there is a serious threat. And resisting the threat with integrity and courage is what the episode challenges readers themselves to do.

THE DEMISE OF BABYLON

- ◆ Chapter 5 of Daniel focuses on the demise of the Babylonians. In this colorful story, the king of Babylon is merrily eating and drinking at a banquet. In a moment of drunken arrogance, he has his servants bring out the bowls that the Babylonians had plundered from the temple in Jerusalem. He wants to drink from the bowls once devoted to Israel's God.
- ◆ But then, the fingers of a hand appear, writing an ominous message on the wall. To decipher the message, the king sends for Daniel, who is a Jewish sage. Daniel explains that all the words portend the coming demise of the empire.
- ◆ The Babylonian king dies at the end of the chapter 5, and a new empire arises, which Daniel identifies with both the Medes and the Persians. But in chapter 6, we receive intimations that this new empire also is transient. Here, the king decrees that people everywhere should worship no one but him for 30 days. It is another attempt to put the ruler in the place of God and to make the claims of the state absolute. Daniel refuses, and because of his disobedience, he's thrown into a den of lions. By the end of the chapter, Daniel is saved, and it's clear that no empire is absolute.



The story of Daniel in the lions' den has parallels to the fiery furnace story; the point of both is that no authority except God's is absolute.

DANIEL'S VISIONS

- ◆ Instead of stories of life in the imperial court, chapters 7 to 12 are accounts of visions that Daniel received. The visions include cryptic images that Daniel cannot understand, but angelic beings help him by disclosing the meaning.
- ◆ Chapter 7 is a good example of this pattern. Daniel has a vision of four beasts rising out of the sea that signify four successive empires: those of the Babylonians, the Medes, the Persians, and the Greeks.
- ◆ The point of the vision is this: History shows that empires rise, one after another, yet each one of them falls in due time. Readers are to resist persecution because it will not last forever. No human ruler is absolute. God's purposes are just and will win out.
- ◆ Daniel 7 pictures God coming for judgment, seated on his throne, surrounded by heavenly beings. It is a vision of accountability, giving assurance that the perpetrators of injustice cannot continue indefinitely. They, like all humans, are ultimately accountable to the higher authority of God.

SUGGESTED READING

Gowan, *Daniel*.

Levenson, *Esther: A Commentary*.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. The Hebrew version of the book of Esther does not explicitly mention God, though it alludes to a higher purpose behind the coincidences that take place in the story. Why might the writer have been so circumspect about the role of God? What kind of readers might find this circumspect approach helpful?
2. In contrast to Esther, Daniel explicitly refers to God working through events in history, including the rise and fall of empires. What kind of readers might find Daniel's emphasis on God's role to be helpful?

RESISTANCE, ADAPTATION, AND THE MACCABEES

The book of 1 Maccabees is another look at Israel's life under foreign domination, this time, focusing on conflict under Greek rule in the 2nd century B.C. It's a story that grapples with issues of cultural change, and it's marked by the tension between resistance and adaptation. As political realities shift and cultural practices are transformed, when is it better to resist change and when is it better to adapt? In this lecture, we'll consider several aspects of this question: the context and changes that generated the issue, the stories of those who the resisted changes, and the ongoing struggle for political independence.

CONTEXT OF 1 MACCABEES

- ◆ The book of 1 Maccabees starts with Alexander the Great, who ruled from 334 to 323 B.C. In the short span of his life, he conquered the Persian Empire and dramatically altered the political landscape. With Alexander's conquests, the region from Greece in the west to Egypt in the south and Pakistan in the east became part of the Greek Empire.
- ◆ Up to this point, all the conquering powers—the Assyrians, Babylonians, and Persians—came from the east. But with the conqueror coming from the west, the language used for government and commerce changed to Greek. What's more, the cities that Alexander founded and refurbished were centers for spreading Greek culture and would come to shape societies throughout the Mediterranean world.
- ◆ After Alexander's death, his empire was divided up among several successors. Eventually, the eastern Mediterranean was dominated by two rulers, who both founded Hellenistic dynasties: Seleucus I (who ruled Syria and regions to the north and east) and Ptolemy I (who ruled Egypt). In between the territory ruled

by these dynasties was Judea, where Jerusalem was located. In the 2nd century B.C., Judea was under Seleucid control.

- ◆ The villain of 1 Maccabees is Antiochus IV, also called Antiochus Epiphanes. He came to power in 175 B.C., and his western capital was the city of Antioch in Syria. The writer of 1 Maccabees warns that Antiochus is “a sinful root,” an opponent of faithful Jews.
- ◆ Questions of adapting to or resisting Greek influence intensified as Antiochus asserted greater control over Jerusalem and the surrounding region. He sent his army to push back a growing threat from his Egyptian rivals, the Ptolemies. Then, he raided the temple in Jerusalem and established a fortress there, where troops were stationed to control opposition to Seleucid rule.
- ◆ Things reached the breaking point when Antiochus tried to suppress Jewish practice and impose his own religious tradition by force. According to 1 Maccabees 1, he banned the offering of Jewish sacrifices in the temple and prohibited the observance of the Sabbath and other holidays. Copies of the Jewish law were destroyed, and people who had their children circumcised were put to death.

One flash point in the Jewish response to Greek culture was the establishment of a gymnasium in Jerusalem, where young athletes competed naked; to fit in at the gymnasium, some Jews had their circumcisions surgically reversed.



- ◆ Antiochus also turned the temple into a pagan sanctuary. He put up statues to various deities and set up altars where people could sacrifice swine and other animals that Jews considered unclean. The crowning touch came in mid-December of 167 B.C., when Antiochus put what the writer calls a “desolating sacrilege” in the temple. That sacrilege was a pagan altar that was placed on top of the Jewish altar of burnt offering. Other sources add that Antiochus dedicated the temple to Zeus, whom the Seleucids worshipped as the god of heaven.

RESISTING CHANGE

- ◆ The story of resistance to these changes begins in chapter 2. It was a movement initiated by a man named Mattathias, who came from a family of priests. One of his sons was named Judah, and his nickname was Maccabee, which means “the hammer.” Judah played such an important role that his nickname is used for the resistance movement as a whole, which is called the Maccabean revolt.
- ◆ The incident that sparked the revolt took place in Modein, northwest of Jerusalem. An officer of the king came there to induce Mattathias and others to adopt non-Jewish practices and to offer a pagan sacrifice. To sweeten the deal, the officer promised to give them gold and silver and to grant them the title “friends of the king.” But Mattathias insisted that he would live by the covenant of his ancestors.
- ◆ At that moment, another Jewish man stepped forward to show that he was willing to adapt to the new situation and offer the sacrifice demanded by the king. But Mattathias was outraged at what he considered apostasy. He killed both the Jewish man and the king’s officer and fled to the desert. From there, he assembled a fighting force and engaged in guerilla warfare against the Seleucids and their supporters.
- ◆ With the death of Mattathias, his son Judah Maccabee became the leader. Judah transformed the resistance movement into a large-scale military campaign that resisted Seleucid oppression and reestablished Jewish control of the temple in Jerusalem.
- ◆ In the middle of chapter 4, Judah and his men returned to Jerusalem, found the temple in a shambles, and began the process of rebuilding. In mid-December of

164 B.C., three years after Judah's return, the restored sanctuary was ready for dedication. The festivities lasted for eight days, and the celebration was known as Hanukkah (Hebrew: "dedication"). In later times, people began telling the story of the lamp oil that miraculously lasted for eight days on the first Hanukkah, but that's not part of the narrative in 1 Maccabees.

- ◆ The Maccabean resistance movement eventually forced the Seleucids to halt their attempt at suppressing Jewish practice. In chapter 5, the Maccabees achieve a series of military victories that extend their influence over much of the country. Then, in chapter 6, the success of the Maccabees is contrasted with the failure of Antiochus, who tries to plunder other cities but cannot do so. According to the author of 1 Maccabees, Antiochus becomes sick with disappointment and dies full of regret. His successors agree to lift the ban on Jewish religious practice in the interests of peace.



Judah Maccabee would earn his nickname by "hammering" the Seleucid armies with his victories on the battlefield.

ADAPTING TO CHANGE

- ◆ The narrative in 1 Maccabees doesn't stop at this high point. Instead, it continues with an increasingly complex story. We find the Maccabees fighting not only for religious freedom but for political independence. And once again, we find a tension between resistance and adaptation. The battle scenes show the Maccabees resisting Seleucid rule, but to achieve independence, they must also adapt to changing political realities. This raises interesting questions about the points at which adaptation either advances the Maccabean cause or requires a compromise of their principles.
- ◆ One point of adaptation is Judah Maccabee's willingness to establish an alliance with Rome. In chapter 8, the writer provides an idealized account of Roman expansion in this period. And it's important to note that Rome shared a religious and cultural outlook quite similar to that of Greece. Under Rome, the patterns of Greek influence continue.
- ◆ Yet here, Judah Maccabee makes a pragmatic decision: to gain greater political independence from the Seleucids, he becomes an ally of the Romans. His movement begins by resisting the policies of the government based in Syria, but it continues with the support of a government based in Rome. He's fighting to be free from foreign domination, but he does so by enlisting foreign help.
- ◆ We can certainly interpret this as a practical political move, but it raises questions for reflection. To what extent does Judah succeed in maintaining his people's distinctive way of life through resistance, and to what extent does adapting mean giving up that distinctiveness? Does he achieve the goals that inspired him at first, or does he lose sight of his original vision?
- ◆ These questions persist after the death of Judah, who is killed on the battlefield, and leadership goes to his brother Jonathan. Now the situation involves politics and priesthood. At this point, the Seleucids are going through their own internal power struggle. There are two rivals for the Seleucid throne, and one of them decides to strengthen his position by gaining the support of Jonathan and the Maccabean rebels.

- ◆ This rival says that if Jonathan will support his bid for the Seleucid throne, he will make Jonathan high priest of the Jewish nation. The Jews will still be subject to the Seleucids, but serving as high priest will give Jonathan greater social status.
- ◆ This offer fits Greek practice, in which it was common for a ruler to honor someone by appointing him to the priesthood. But in Jewish tradition, the high priest had to come from a specific Jewish family who had the correct credentials. Despite the fact that he came from a family of ordinary priests and that the offer violated Jewish tradition, Jonathan took the office anyway. In his eyes, doing so was a necessary adaptation that advanced his own political career and the interests of the Maccabean movement.
- ◆ The final step came when leadership passed to yet another of Judah Maccabee's brothers, Simon, who finally brought the resistance movement to its goal of greater political independence. The year was 142 B.C., and Simon had strengthened his political and military position enough to ask that his region of Judea might be freed from taxation by the Seleucids. By this point, the Seleucids had grown tired of trying to maintain their control over Judea, and they agreed. The burden of foreign taxation was lifted, the foreign troops that had been stationed in Jerusalem were removed, and a new era of Jewish independence began.

SUMMING UP THE MACCABEES

- ◆ The Maccabean movement began with resistance to foreign influence, especially the Seleucids' efforts to suppress Jewish practice. But it led to the formation of a Jewish kingdom that seemed to follow Greek models in a figure who combined the priestly, political, and military roles. And it maintained its position through an alliance with Rome. Did the adaptations of the Maccabees help them preserve the distinctive identity of the Jewish people, or was something essential lost in the process?
- ◆ In the decades that followed, the Maccabean kingdom was plagued by infighting. To stabilize the region, the Romans took control. In 63 B.C., the Roman general Pompey captured Jerusalem and brought Judea under Roman domination.

- ◆ Eventually, the Romans appointed a local warlord named Herod to govern Judea, and he transformed it into a Roman province. He renamed cities after Augustus, renovated the Jerusalem temple, and built a fortress next to the temple. In that fortress, in the heart of Jerusalem, Roman troops were stationed. That would be the state of things in the late 1st century B.C., when the story of Jesus begins.

SUGGESTED READING

Doran, “The First Book of Maccabees.”

Trebolle, “Canon of the Old Testament.”

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. To what extent did the Maccabees succeed in resisting Greek culture and maintaining a distinctive Jewish way of life? To what extent did they end up adapting to Greek culture? Was adaptation a practical way of achieving the movement’s goals, or did it lead to the loss of the movement’s original vision?
2. In what ways are the Maccabees similar to the military and political leaders we encountered earlier in the course? In what ways are the Maccabees different from those earlier leaders?

JESUS AS MESSIAH IN MARK

The New Testament contains multiple portraits of Jesus, and when taken together, these texts create a kind of dialogue about the significance of his work. The dialogue begins as we read the first four books in the New Testament, which are called gospels. Each gospel is a narrative about the life of Jesus, and each gospel has its own unique elements. Instead of blending them into a single story, the New Testament places them side by side, allowing the different perspectives to stand in creative tension with one another. The four gospels are called Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John; in this lecture, we'll begin to explore how these gospels work as narratives with the Gospel of Mark.

MARK'S INTRODUCTION

- ◆ The Gospel of Mark is the shortest of the gospels and was probably the first to be written. Jesus lived in the early decades of the 1st century A.D. He was crucified around the year 30, and in the decades that followed, the stories about him were handed down by word of mouth. But around the year 70, some of this material was written down in Mark's gospel.
- ◆ Mark's introduction sets high expectations for readers. The opening line says, "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." The Greek word for "gospel" is *euangelion*, which literally means "good news." In other ancient literature, the word could be used for the good news of a victory in battle. In Mark, it introduces a narrative in which Jesus overcomes the forces of evil in the world and announces the arrival of God's kingdom.
- ◆ Mark refers to Jesus as Christ. The Greek word is *christos*, which means "anointed one," and the Hebrew equivalent is "messiah." You may recall that when they assumed royal office, King Saul and King David were anointed. Referring to Jesus as Christ or Anointed One suggests that he, too, is a king.



Perhaps some of the most popular scenes in Western art are those of Jesus's birth, typically showing the infant in the manger with his parents on either side.

- ◆ That same idea is conveyed by the expression *Son of God*. In the story of King David (2. Sam. 7), God promised that David's descendants would inherit his throne and establish a kingdom that endured forever. The passage said that God would be a father to David's successor, and it referred to his successor as God's son. Thus, the expression *Son of God* has royal connotations. It raises high expectations about the kingly figure who is coming.
- ◆ The sense of expectation continues in the narrative itself, where an unusual messenger prepares for the king's arrival. The messenger is a peculiar figure named John the baptizer, whom ancient readers would have realized resembled Elijah.
 - As you recall, in the book of Kings, Elijah never died. Rather, he was swept away to heaven on a fiery chariot and a whirlwind. The prophetic book of Malachi said that Elijah would return before the time of God's judgment.
 - Mark quotes from Malachi in the opening scene of his gospel, saying, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way." The idea is that through John the baptizer, the hopes expressed by the ancient prophetic writings are being realized.
 - The book of Malachi said that Elijah would bring a message of reconciliation, and the opening scenes in Mark vary the theme by saying that John announced "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." Of course, baptism is a ritual washing, and here, it is said to reflect repentance, a turning away from sin.
- ◆ Mark's gospel includes no account of Jesus's birth or childhood. Instead, Jesus simply appears when he comes to John for baptism. Then, the narrative takes a surprising turn. John has spoken about baptism as a sign of repentance, but Mark portrays it mainly as a moment of divine revelation. When Jesus is baptized, the sky is torn apart and a voice from heaven declares that Jesus is God's beloved Son. This revelation of Jesus as God's Son inaugurates a period of action in which Jesus engages the forces that hold people captive in sin and becomes an agent of deliverance.

THE KINGDOM OF GOD

- ◆ According to Mark, Jesus's public activity begins with the announcement: "The time is fulfilled. The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe in the good news." At this point, what Jesus means by the kingdom is not defined, and when he refers to it, he raises more questions than he answers.
- ◆ As you'll recall, the kingdom of Israel was united under Saul, David, and Solomon. But that unity was shattered with the formation of the northern and southern kingdoms. Both kingdoms were then devastated by waves of conquest. In time, the Maccabees revolted and established an independent kingdom; it lasted for some decades but then fell to the Romans. In political terms, the hope of a reestablished kingdom in the Promised Land had not been fully realized.
- ◆ Alongside these political realities was hope for something of another order, a time when God would establish a kingdom of peace and harmony. Isaiah's vision was of a world in which nations would turn their swords into plowshares. Daniel looked for the time when oppressive empires would end. What did Jesus mean with his message about the kingdom of God?
- ◆ After Jesus announces the coming of the kingdom, he acts as a commander summoning his troops. As he walks beside the Sea of Galilee, he sees fishermen and commands them to follow him. Surprisingly, they do; thus, the initial impression is that God's kingdom begins to come about as people respond favorably to Jesus's word.
- ◆ The plot intensifies as Jesus launches an assault against what are depicted as the powers of evil. For example, he encounters a man possessed by an unclean spirit or demon. In the process of healing, this spirit cries out, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?" From Mark's perspective, the answer is yes, that is what Jesus has come to do. We get the sense that Jesus is bringing about God's kingdom by defeating the powers that diminish life.
- ◆ We can see a process of redefinition taking place in these scenes. The word *kingdom* typically referred to the political order, but in Mark's gospel, the impression is that God reigns where life is made whole. A sign of the kingdom

is healing, and that impression deepens as the story continues and Jesus heals other people. Mark shows the kingdom coming where life is restored.

- ◆ The next chapter expands that idea to include the healing of relationships. Here, instead of healing a paralyzed man, Jesus says to him, “Your sins are forgiven.” This categorical announcement implies the restoration of relationship with God.

JESUS’S PARABLES

- ◆ Some of Jesus’s most memorable teachings come through his parables, which are short stories that contain lessons and figurative sayings. What’s intriguing about the parables in Mark is that they initially seem so ordinary, yet they repeatedly baffle Jesus’s listeners and emphasize the mystery of God’s kingdom.
- ◆ For example, chapter 4 begins with Jesus telling a crowd of people a parable about a farmer who is planting grain by hand. The farmer takes handfuls of grain and scatters it on the ground, but in doing so, he seems careless.
 - Most of the seed falls where it would not grow—on rocks or among the weeds. Only in the end does Jesus mention that some seed falls on good soil, where it produces a bountiful crop.
 - Jesus’s listeners are baffled by the parable, but he explains that it is about the mystery of God’s kingdom. The explanation identifies the seed with the message about the kingdom. And the images of the birds, the heat of the sun, and the thorns represent hostile powers that prevent the message from bearing fruit. All those forces prevent people from receiving Jesus’s message and living it out. Thus, in one sense, the mystery is that despite the challenges, some people do receive the message.
 - In a wider literary sense, the message is that Jesus is like the farmer. We see him spreading the message about the kingdom—even where it is unlikely to grow—and showing people what the message means by offering healing and forgiveness.
 - The mystery is that he persists in planting even when there seems to be little promise of a return. The parable sets a pattern and intimates that what is true for Jesus will also be true for those who follow him.

SUFFERING AND SERVICE

- ◆ Chapters 8 to 10 of Mark focus on themes of suffering and service. In chapter 8, Jesus asks his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” They report that Jesus is rumored to be a new John the Baptist or, perhaps, Elijah or some other prophet. But when Jesus asks, “But who do you say that I am?” the disciple named Peter says, “You are the Christ” (God’s anointed king), identifying Jesus in royal terms.
- ◆ At this pivotal moment, Jesus does not reject the title but, instead, redefines it in terms of suffering and service.
 - In Mark 8:31, Jesus makes the first direct reference to the suffering he will experience at the end of his ministry. With evident knowledge of the future, he says that he must suffer and be rejected by the Jewish leaders. Three times in Mark’s gospel, Jesus tells us that he will be killed and, after three days, rise again.
 - In the movement of the narrative, these statements about his coming death and resurrection form the way in which readers are to understand what it means to call Jesus the royal Messiah. He follows a path that moves from death into life.
 - Jesus’s words about suffering stun his disciples, who have come to think of him as the Messiah. Yet Jesus insists that suffering and service will characterize his course of action and set the direction for those who follow him. He says, “If any want to follow me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”
- ◆ The positive dimension becomes more prominent as Jesus defines what it means to follow him in terms of service. In chapter 10, where he speaks of his suffering, death, and resurrection for a third time, he announces, “whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

SUGGESTED READING

Marcus, *Mark 1–8*.

Rhoads, Dewey, and Michie, *Mark as Story*.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. The lecture notes places where Mark's gospel recalls aspects of the Old Testament writings, including traditions about David and Elijah and the words of such prophets as Isaiah and Malachi. How does the story of Jesus seem to realize the hopes associated with those Old Testament writings? How does his story seem to alter those expectations?
2. Parables are a form of teaching that uses imagery. Why might Jesus have spoken about the kingdom in parables instead of providing a direct definition of what the kingdom is?

MARK ON THE CRUCIFIXION AND RESURRECTION

The Gospel of Mark introduces Jesus and his message about the kingdom of God. For Jews of the time, hope for the kingdom usually meant a golden age of peace. But in Mark's narrative, the kingdom is redefined in terms of healing and forgiveness, suffering and service. In the second part of Mark's gospel, the process of redefining the kingdom continues. Jesus is given royal titles, but the opposition to his purported kingship ultimately intensifies and leads to his crucifixion. As a writer, the author of Mark must grapple with this apparent contradiction between kingship and crucifixion, between power and weakness. His challenge is to narrate a story in which crucifixion does not negate Jesus's kingship but defines it.

JESUS IN JERUSALEM

- ◆ In Mark 11, the setting shifts from Galilee in the north to the city of Jerusalem in the south. Jesus approaches the city in a dramatic royal procession, riding a colt. The crowd in Mark's gospel makes the royal theme explicit, saying, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!" From Mark's perspective, Jesus is the coming king. But how will his kingship be carried out?
- ◆ As the story progresses, we find that the positive reception by the crowd is matched by a negative reaction from Jewish authorities. A pivotal moment comes when Jesus makes a prophetic critique of the central religious institution of the time: the Jerusalem temple.
 - In the courtyard in front of the temple were merchants, selling animals to pilgrims for sacrifice, and moneychangers to exchange travelers' foreign coins.
 - Jesus chases both the merchants and their customers out of the temple and overturns the tables of the moneychangers. He announces that the temple is

not serving the purpose for which it was built—to be, in an echo of Isaiah, “a house of prayer for all nations.”

- ◆ In response, the Jewish leaders intensify their opposition, trying a political tactic in chapter 12. They ask Jesus whether or not it is right to pay taxes to Caesar.
 - For many people, the taxes demanded by Rome represented foreign domination, and paying the tax meant subservience to Rome. These opponents put Jesus in an awkward position. If he supports the tax, he will alienate himself from the public. If he rejects it, he will get in trouble with Rome.
 - Ultimately, Jesus answers, “Give to Caesar the things that are Caesars, and to God the things that are God’s.” This answer makes a place for Roman authority, while affirming a higher loyalty to God.

THE LAST SUPPER

- ◆ Mark 14 tells of Jesus’s Last Supper with his disciples and his arrest, developing the narrative tension that has been building. On the one hand, opposition to Jesus continues, and it now infiltrates Jesus’s inner circle. On the other hand, Jesus remains committed to the message of God’s kingdom, which brings deliverance and is enacted through suffering and service.
- ◆ The chapter begins with opposition. The Jewish leaders are looking for a way to arrest Jesus but want to do so secretly because he remains popular with the crowd. Soon, we learn that one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, agrees to betray Jesus to the authorities. When Jesus gathers for a meal with his disciples in the evening, he discloses that one of them will betray him.
- ◆ Readers have struggled to understand what prompts Judas to turn against Jesus, but significantly, Mark does not explain the betrayal. He simply accepts it as a given. And the growing opposition against Jesus creates the context in which Jesus must act. For Mark, the question is not what causes Judas to betray Jesus but, rather: Given the growing opposition—which now infiltrates Jesus’s own circle—how will Jesus respond?
- ◆ At the meal in Mark’s gospel, Jesus invokes the theme of Passover to define his own course of action.

- Jesus blesses the bread and says, “Take. This is my body.” The bread is a visible reminder of God’s gift of deliverance in the Exodus. And by identifying the bread with his body, Jesus anticipates that God’s deliverance now will come through Jesus’s gift of his own body.
 - Then, he takes a cup of wine, gives thanks, and says, “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many.” In the Passover story, the blood on the doors was a sign of belonging to God. At the meal, Jesus makes the shedding of his blood an act that is done for others. It is an act of self-giving that brings others into God’s covenant.
 - Thus, in Mark, the backdrop of the meal is betrayal, which expresses alienation. But Jesus responds by reasserting that his intent is to create relationship and life together under God’s covenant.
- ◆ Later in the chapter, the theme of opposition returns as Jesus goes to pray at a place called Gethsemane. Soon, a group armed with swords and clubs appears, and in a moment of pointed irony, Judas steps forward and betrays Jesus by kissing him. With this ironic turn, Jesus is taken away to be tried.

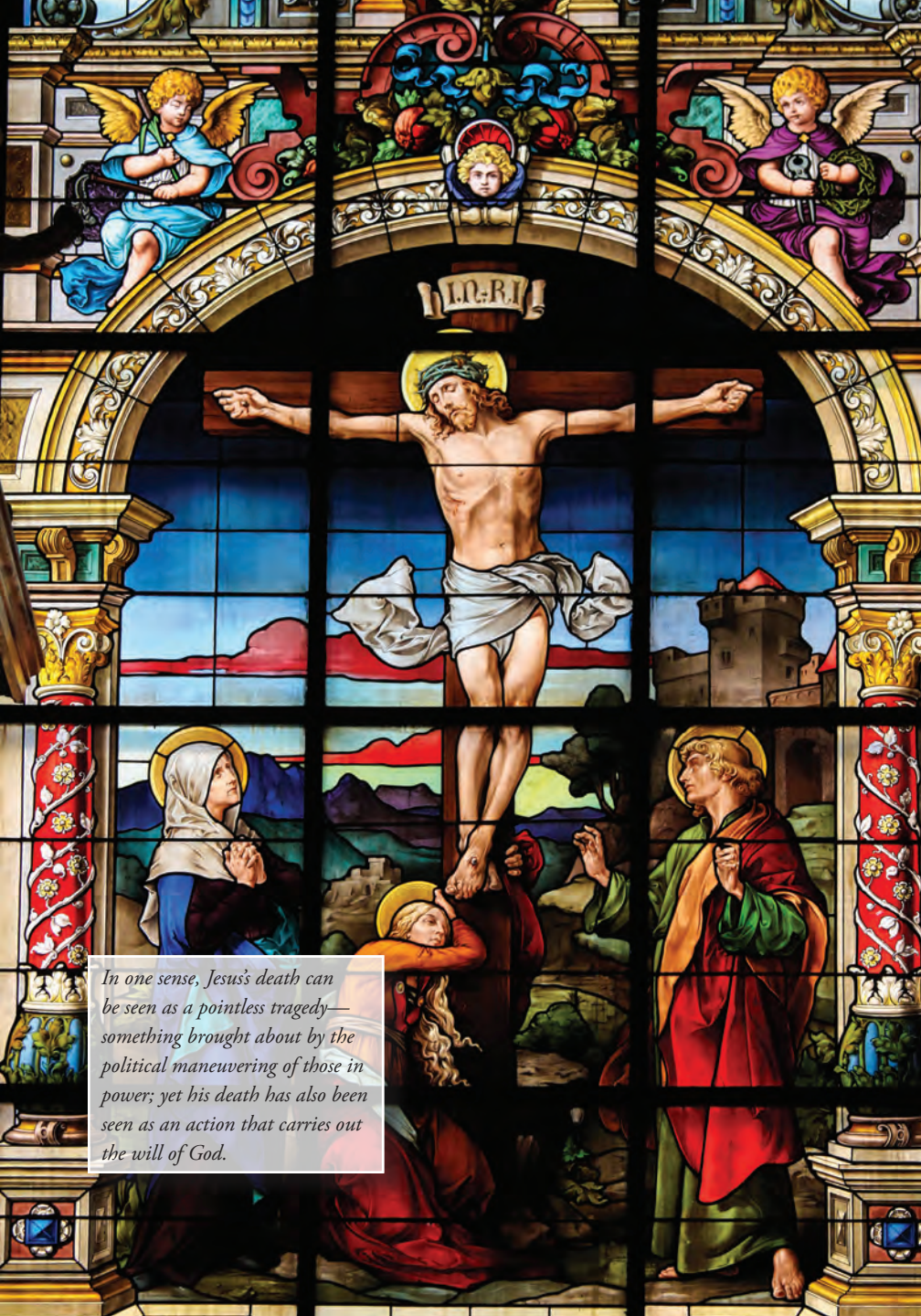
JESUS’S TRIAL

- ◆ In Mark 14:53, Jesus is taken to a gathering of Jewish leaders for a highly irregular trial. (The trial takes place at night; it’s on a holiday; and the outcome is determined before the trial even begins—the leaders want Jesus put to death.) The problem is that Jewish law required convincing testimony from two or three witnesses, and that proved difficult to get.
- ◆ Eventually, the high priest questions Jesus about his purported kingship. He asks, “Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?” (meaning God). Jesus affirms that he is, and from Mark’s perspective, that is profoundly true. But throughout the gospel, Mark has shown Jesus redefining his role in terms of healing and forgiveness, of suffering and service. And his opponents fail to see that. They can only hear Jesus’s words as blasphemy and now condemn him.
- ◆ This brings us to Jesus’s encounter with Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor. As governor, Pilate was the most powerful man in the province.

- The Jewish leaders bring Jesus to Pilate because he has the authority to pronounce the sentence and carry out the execution. Pilate's perspective is political. He wants to know whether Jesus claims to be the king of the Jews, because for Pilate, someone with royal aspirations would presumably foment insurrection. Despite the accusations, Pilate finds no convincing evidence that Jesus poses a threat to Roman rule.
- Because it's a holiday, Pilate offers to release Jesus, but his tactic backfires. The people demand that he release another prisoner and crucify Jesus.
- Pilate repeats that he can find no grounds for convicting Jesus, but in the end, he capitulates. The most powerful man in the province pronounces the death sentence, knowing that he has no legitimate grounds for doing so.

THE CRUCIFIXION

- ◆ The crucifixion brings the conflicting claims about Jesus to their narrative climax. For the opponents, the crucifixion shows that Jesus's kingship is a sham. The would-be Messiah is now condemned and becomes the object of ridicule. But for Mark, the crucifixion shows that Jesus's kingship is authentic; it completes the redefinition of kingship in terms of self-giving and suffering.
- ◆ After Pilate pronounces the death sentence, he has Jesus whipped. The Roman soldiers then stage a mock coronation before taking Jesus to the place of execution. Bystanders there ridicule Jesus by repeating the accusations that were made at the trial and about his claim to be the Messiah. As a healer, he may have saved others, but now he's unable to save himself. They challenge this would-be Messiah to come down from the cross, so they might believe in him.
- ◆ The pivotal moment comes when Jesus cries out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" These words of anguish go to the heart of the matter: Does Jesus's suffering negate any notion of his kingship, or does it define the character of his kingship? From Mark's perspective, the words are deeply consistent with the path Jesus has chosen. The words are actually a quotation from Psalm 22, which expresses the depth of human suffering; by voicing the psalm, Jesus shows that he shares fully in that experience of suffering.



In one sense, Jesus's death can be seen as a pointless tragedy—something brought about by the political maneuvering of those in power; yet his death has also been seen as an action that carries out the will of God.

- ◆ In what follows, there are also direct narrative responses to the taunts about the temple and kingship. Mark says that at the moment Jesus dies, the curtain in the temple (separating the inner and outer parts of the sanctuary) is torn apart.
 - This gives divine affirmation to Jesus's criticism of the temple. It signifies that in the crucifixion, the barrier separating God from human beings is removed. If the temple curtain concealed the place of God's presence, the crucifixion reveals it. It reveals that God is present in the place of suffering.
 - For Mark, this is a miraculous action, not something that bystanders at the crucifixion would have observed, and it gives a kind of surreal quality to the scene. But within Mark's narrative, the tearing of the curtain provides divine commentary on the death of Jesus.
- ◆ God's presence at the crucifixion is affirmed by the Roman guard who stands by the cross. As the guard looks at the dying Jesus, he says "Truly this man was the Son of God." Where the opponents assumed that Jesus's death would put an end to such claims, the guard insists that his death bears out their truth. In Mark, what it means to be the Son of God is defined by Jesus's willingness to enter fully into the reality of human suffering.

THE RESURRECTION

- ◆ Mark's account of Jesus's resurrection is both brief and filled with mystery. At the end of chapter 15, Mark says that Jesus died on the day before the Sabbath. As evening came, his body was placed in a tomb, with a large stone over the entrance.
- ◆ In chapter 16, three women come to the tomb on the day after the Sabbath to anoint Jesus's body. But when they arrive, they find the tomb open, and a young man sitting inside. He says that Jesus has been raised and is going ahead of them to Galilee, where they will see him. Terrified, the women run away and say nothing.
- ◆ That is where Mark's Gospel ends, on this unsettling note of fear and silence. Many modern readers find this abrupt ending unsatisfying. Mark does not actually describe the risen Jesus appearing to the disciples. What the women have is the promise of seeing him. And they will find out if the promise is true

only by embarking on a journey to Galilee. The question is whether they will do so or whether fear and silence will persist.

SUGGESTED READING

Marcus, *Mark 8–16*.

Senior, *The Passion of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark*.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. How does Mark portray opposition to Jesus in his narrative? What are the major factors that lead to the crucifixion?
2. How does Mark's narrative connect the crucifixion to Jesus's role as Christ or Messiah?

THE DYNAMICS OF FORGIVENESS IN MATTHEW

In the Gospel of Matthew, a central concern is one's way of life. The narrative was written for Christian readers who lived perhaps 50 years after the crucifixion of Jesus. During those years, the followers of Jesus formed communities that were located in various cities in the Roman Empire. As those communities handed on the message of Jesus from one generation to the next, they had to ask how it would shape their way of life. In this lecture, we'll explore that question by focusing on passages that are distinctive of Matthew's gospel; specifically, we'll take up four elements: trust, transformation, community, and redemption.

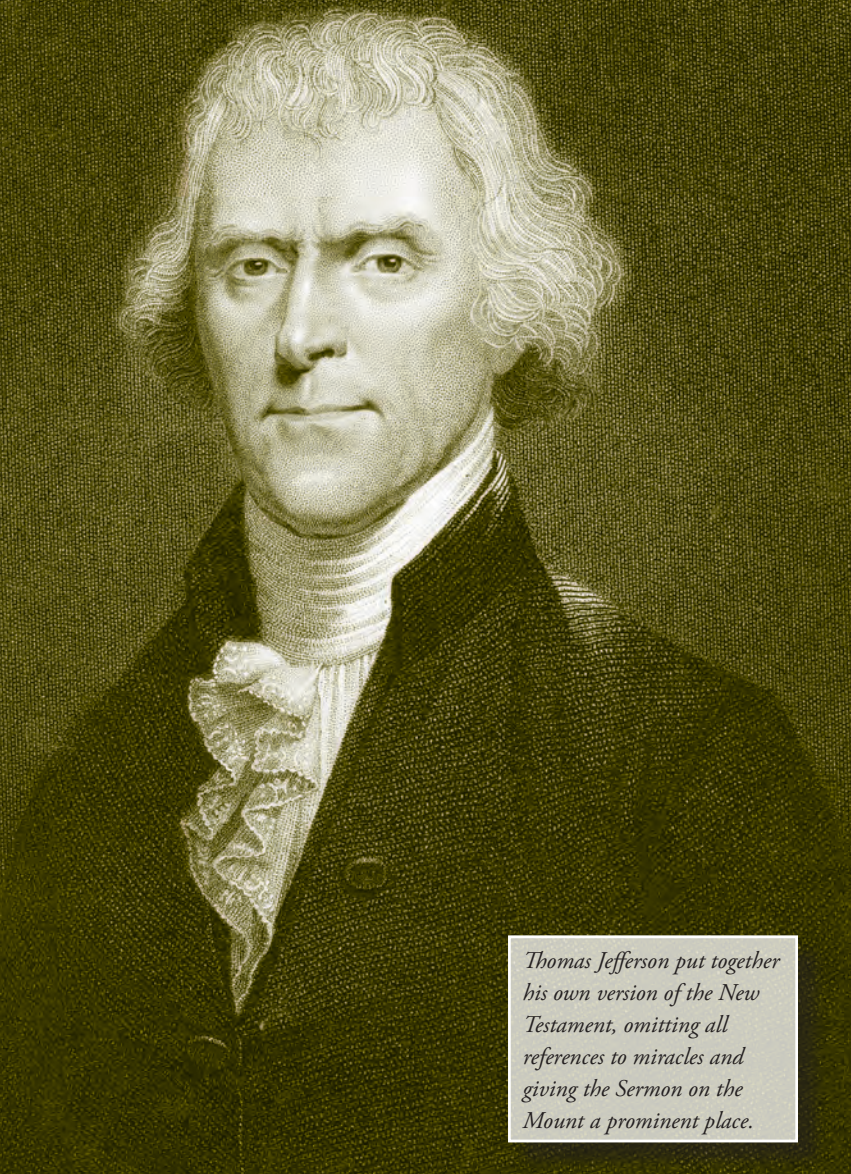
TRUST

- ◆ Matthew introduces Jesus by tracing his ancestry from Abraham to King David, then to the exile in Babylon and through the generations that followed. That genealogy gives us the sense that the whole sweep of Israel's story is moving toward the moment when Jesus appears as Israel's Messiah. But then a crisis threatens to derail the process.
- ◆ The situation is that Jesus's mother, Mary, is engaged to a man named Joseph. She is pregnant, and Joseph knows that he is not the father. He decides to end the relationship quietly to avoid a public scandal. But Joseph has a dream, in which an angel tells him that the child has been conceived through the Holy Spirit. And the angel says this fulfills what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah: "Behold a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel" ("God with us").
 - In later Christian tradition, the idea that Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary became an official teaching of many churches, and in some cases, it has been the focus of theological debate. But in Matthew's narrative, the words of Isaiah identify Jesus as the child through whom God's purposes will be worked out.

- In Isaiah, the promise of Immanuel meant deliverance from military invasion. But in Joseph's dream that changes, so that Immanuel is to bring deliverance from human sin. He is a Messiah of a spiritual kingdom, not a kingdom of mortals on earth. Everything in Joseph's dream seems counterintuitive, yet Joseph responds to it with trust. And he proceeds with the marriage, despite the threat of scandal.
- ◆ With that, the story moves forward to the time of Jesus's birth in Bethlehem. But then the story takes a surprising turn, because the first people to arrive to see the child are foreigners with a rather dubious pedigree—*magi* (astrologers). They come from the east and are, in a sense, pagans and outsiders to the tradition of Israel.
 - The magi are led to follow a star, which takes them initially to Jerusalem. In a remarkable display of trust, they go to the court of King Herod the Great and ask where to find the child, whom they somehow know has been born king of the Jews. Herod gathers the Jewish leaders, who have a ready answer. The Scriptures say the king will come from Bethlehem.
 - Interestingly, the insiders who have the answer remain in Jerusalem, while the outsiders who ask the question travel on to Bethlehem. There, they worship the child and offer him their gifts. Thus, even as Matthew affirms the distinctive Davidic tradition by tying the story of Jesus to Bethlehem, the story emphasizes the importance of outsiders by bringing in the magi.
- ◆ This opening section of Matthew then jumps forward in time to an account of John the Baptist and the baptism of Jesus that is similar to that of Mark's gospel. Matthew also includes an episode that appears in Mark in which Jesus is tested by the devil, but Matthew's version is much more detailed. This period of testing is often called the temptation of Christ. In Matthew's gospel, Jesus must trust that the way forward means resisting the allure of evil.

TRANSFORMATION

- ◆ The next major section of the gospel centers on the teaching of Jesus. In chapters 5 through 7, we come to the Sermon on the Mount, which is a hallmark of Matthew's gospel. It's here that we find the Golden Rule and other good, practical advice. Interestingly, however, much of the Sermon on the Mount



Thomas Jefferson put together his own version of the New Testament, omitting all references to miracles and giving the Sermon on the Mount a prominent place.

is also unconventional. It goes beyond familiar forms of moral instruction to transform the way people see themselves and their world.

- ◆ The sermon opens with a series of statements called *beatitudes*, each beginning with the word “blessed”: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.” There are nine of these statements in all.
 - The beatitudes bring together situations that seem incompatible. The word *blessed* communicates a sense of well-being, yet those who are poor in spirit or are grieving or meek would not feel well-being.
 - The beatitudes alter the way people see their current situations by combining realism with hope. They are realistic in that they name the emptiness, grief, and vulnerability. They recognize that such experiences are real and cannot be dismissed. Yet they insist that even as people face emptiness and loss, they can see themselves as recipients of God’s favor. Despite the vulnerability, they are people who are valued by God.
 - The beatitudes add hope by insisting that the emptiness and loss of the present need not define the future. Jesus says that the hope of experiencing God’s kingdom remains. And as he continues, he extends the list to include a word of blessing for those who are merciful, are pure in heart, make peace, and do what is right in the face of opposition. For Jesus, those are the things of abiding value.
- ◆ The Sermon on the Mount continues transforming the perspectives of readers by adopting a more confrontational tone in the middle of chapter 5. Here, Jesus contrasts traditional standards of behavior with his own more radical view.
 - He begins by quoting from the Ten Commandments, starting with “You shall not kill.” The assumption is that someone who commits murder will face judgment. But Jesus radicalizes the idea by focusing on anger, which is the underlying cause of the killing. He says that even if you are only angry with someone else, you will face judgment.
 - He does the same thing with the commandment “You shall not commit adultery.” In an ordinary sense, this means that you are not to have an extramarital affair. But again, Jesus goes to the underlying cause. He says that if you even look at another person with lust, you are committing adultery in your heart.

- These radical statements are designed to startle people out of their complacency. Jesus calls people beyond simple adherence to the traditional code of behavior. His goal is nothing less than heartfelt adherence to the will of God.
- ◆ This pattern culminates at the end of chapter 5, where Jesus observes that the traditional view was that people should love their neighbors and hate their enemies. But Jesus says, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” He points out that anyone can show love for those who love them in return. But when you limit your love to insiders, nothing changes. For Jesus, love is transformative. Instead of reinforcing the boundaries, love overcomes them.

COMMUNITY

- ◆ Chapter 18 of Matthew focuses on community life. This section would have been especially important for the Christian communities that formed in the decades after the crucifixion of Jesus who faced ongoing questions about how to live together.
- ◆ Jesus begins with practical advice about conflict. He describes a situation of working out conflict privately, with two or three other people, or with the wider community. If in the end, the person with whom you are in conflict is utterly intractable, then the community should treat that person as an outsider.
- ◆ Peter, one of Jesus’s disciples, wants to know how often he needs to forgive someone who repeatedly sins against him. Setting himself what he thinks is a high bar, he asks whether forgiving someone up to 7 times is enough. But Jesus says that one should forgive not merely 7 times but 77 times (or, in some translations, 70 times 7). To make sure people get the point, he reinforces it with a parable about a slave who owes a large sum of money to a king.
 - This parable adds perspective to community life. People are not only to see themselves as those who are owed something by others, but they are to see themselves as those whose own debts have been forgiven.
 - In community, they must see themselves first as the recipients of forgiveness, and in that light, they are to deal with others in the same way.

REDEMPTION

- ◆ In Matthew, the account of Jesus's death and resurrection begins in chapter 21 with the story of Jesus riding into Jerusalem, being welcomed by the crowds, and driving the merchants out of the temple. It continues with Jesus eating a final meal with his disciples and being betrayed, arrested, interrogated, and crucified.
- ◆ All of that is recounted in Mark, as well, but there is an intensity in Matthew's narrative that readers have found disturbing.
 - For instance, like Mark, Matthew tells of Jesus being questioned by the Jewish leaders and by Pilate. But Matthew intensifies the sense of conflict, as the Jewish leaders relentlessly pressure Pilate to crucify Jesus.
 - At a pivotal moment, Pilate asks for some water, and he washes his hands of the whole affair. He declares that he will not be responsible for Jesus's death. At that, the Jewish leaders say, "Let his blood be on us and on our children."
- ◆ But Matthew's story of redemption is finally directed toward life, not death. After recounting the crucifixion and burial, the gospel concludes with an expanded account of Jesus's resurrection. Here, the ground shakes and an angel descends from heaven to open the tomb. The angel tells the women who visit



In Western history, the scene in which the Jewish leaders take responsibility for Jesus's death has sometimes been lifted out of Matthew's gospel to feed anti-Semitism and violence against Jews.

the tomb that Jesus is alive and will meet them in Galilee. As they go to tell the other disciples, the women are met by the risen Jesus himself, who repeats the angel's message.

- ◆ The final scene takes readers to a mountaintop in Galilee, where the crucified and now living Jesus appears to the disciples. It's a dazzling climax, as the disciples bow before him and worship. The tensions in the story now seem to be resolved, with death is turned into life. Yet Matthew notes that even here, some of the disciples doubted. This is an intriguing detail, because even at the climactic moment, faith and doubt continue to exist side by side. And it's this mixed group of believers and skeptics that Jesus sends out with his teaching.

SUGGESTED READING

Powell, "Sermon on the Mount."

Senior, *Matthew*.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. One of the questions that Matthew's gospel addresses concerns the way people should live. What aspects of the gospel do most to shape a way of life?
2. Jesus's teachings sometimes include creative exaggeration or hyperbole. What were some examples noted in the lecture? How do such creative exaggerations contribute to the message?

LUKE ON A WORLD UPSIDE DOWN

The Gospel of Luke contains many passages that are widely popular, including the Christmas story with the angels and shepherds, some of the best-loved parables, and scenes of Easter. For many readers, the narrative seems simple and appealing. Yet Luke also has a subversive dimension, and one of the major themes is reversal. The author seems to revel in stories where the high and mighty are moved to the periphery and those on the margin are brought to the center. With that in mind, we'll look at this gospel in three sections: the beginning, which tells of Jesus's birth; the middle, which presents his message; and the end, which tells of his death and resurrection.

JESUS'S BIRTH

- ◆ The birth narrative of Jesus begins in the middle of chapter 1, where Luke takes us to the village of Nazareth in Galilee. There, an angel appears to a virgin named Mary and announces that she will give birth to the child Jesus. This scene is traditionally called the Annunciation.
- ◆ Despite the fact that Mary is a peasant from an obscure village, the angel says that her child will fulfill God's ancient promises to King David. He will inherit the throne of Israel and establish an everlasting kingdom. Mary shares this news with a relative named Elizabeth in a poem or song that captures the theme of reversal. She tells of God bringing down the high and mighty, while lifting up powerless. It's a vision of God turning the world upside-down.
- ◆ The Christmas story begins with Mary and Joseph traveling from Nazareth to Bethlehem for the census decreed by Caesar Augustus. When they arrive, they have no place to stay. Mary must give birth in a barn and place the infant in the animals' feeding trough. For the author of Luke, the scene is subversive. He shows God's action unfolding through a couple that is temporarily homeless and not from the seat of imperial authority.

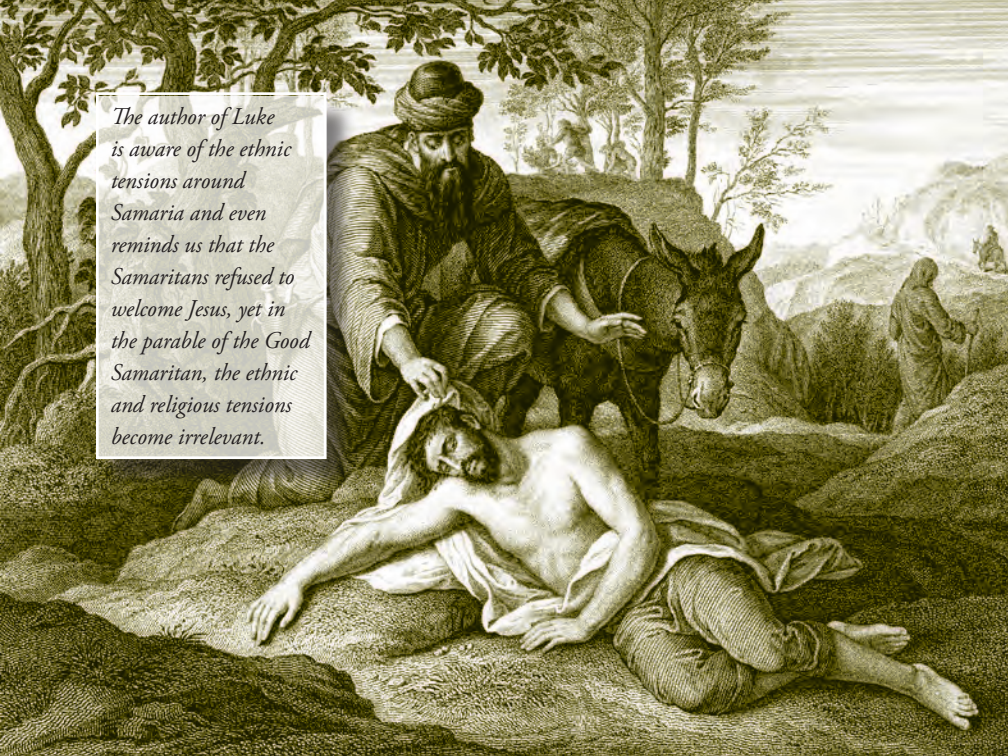
- ◆ The reversal continues when an angel appears to shepherds in the fields nearby. Interestingly, the angel transfers the title *savior*—which was often used for the emperor—to the child in the barn and says that the child’s coming signals peace on earth. It’s a move that shifts the claims of the emperor to the periphery while bringing people on the margin to the center, where they receive the message of God’s favor.

JESUS’S SERMON AT NAZARETH

- ◆ Chapter 4 of Luke marks the beginning of Jesus’s public activity and sets a direction for what is to come. Jesus goes to the synagogue in Nazareth and is handed a scroll, from which he reads: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed, and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”
- ◆ Then, Jesus adds, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” The listeners are initially pleased because they assume they are the primary recipients of God’s favor. Yet Jesus is speaking about the poor, the captives, the blind, and the oppressed—those who, by definition, are not at the center of things. Thus, as he extends God’s favor to those on the margins, those who see themselves as privileged feel displaced. And out of that sense of displacement, hostility will emerge.
- ◆ From this point on, readers can expect that Jesus will be seen as a threat by traditional insiders but will be welcomed by those outside. The angry response he receives in Nazareth foreshadows the resistance that will lead to his death.

PARABLE OF THE GOOD SAMARITAN

- ◆ At the end of Luke 9, Jesus sets out for Jerusalem, planning to cross the region of Samaria. The Samaritans were people brought by the Assyrians from other nations to colonize the area. These newcomers intermarried with local people and blended their religious traditions with those of Israel, but they did not identify with Jerusalem and its temple. Indeed, the Jews and the Samaritans viewed each other with suspicion.



The author of Luke is aware of the ethnic tensions around Samaria and even reminds us that the Samaritans refused to welcome Jesus, yet in the parable of the Good Samaritan, the ethnic and religious tensions become irrelevant.

- ◆ Against this backdrop of ethnic and religious tension, we come to chapter 10 and the parable of the Good Samaritan. Jesus is preaching during his travels, when a Jewish lawyer asks him, “Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” In response, Jesus tells a parable that challenges the man to answer his own question.
- ◆ Jesus describes a man traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho, who is attacked by robbers and left for dead by the side of the road. A priest then walks by—a man of high social status—but he passes the victim without offering help. A Levite, who also has social status, does the same. A third figure, the Samaritan, comes along, tends the man’s injuries, and takes him to an inn to recover. The Samaritan is an outsider, yet he cares for a stranger, lying beside the road.
- ◆ The parable works through the interplay of several points of view. The lawyer who initially asked the question would most naturally identify with the priest

and the Levite. But Jesus presses him to ask how things look from the perspective of the injured man. For the one who is suffering, social status is irrelevant; what matters is compassion.

PARABLE OF THE PRODIGAL SON

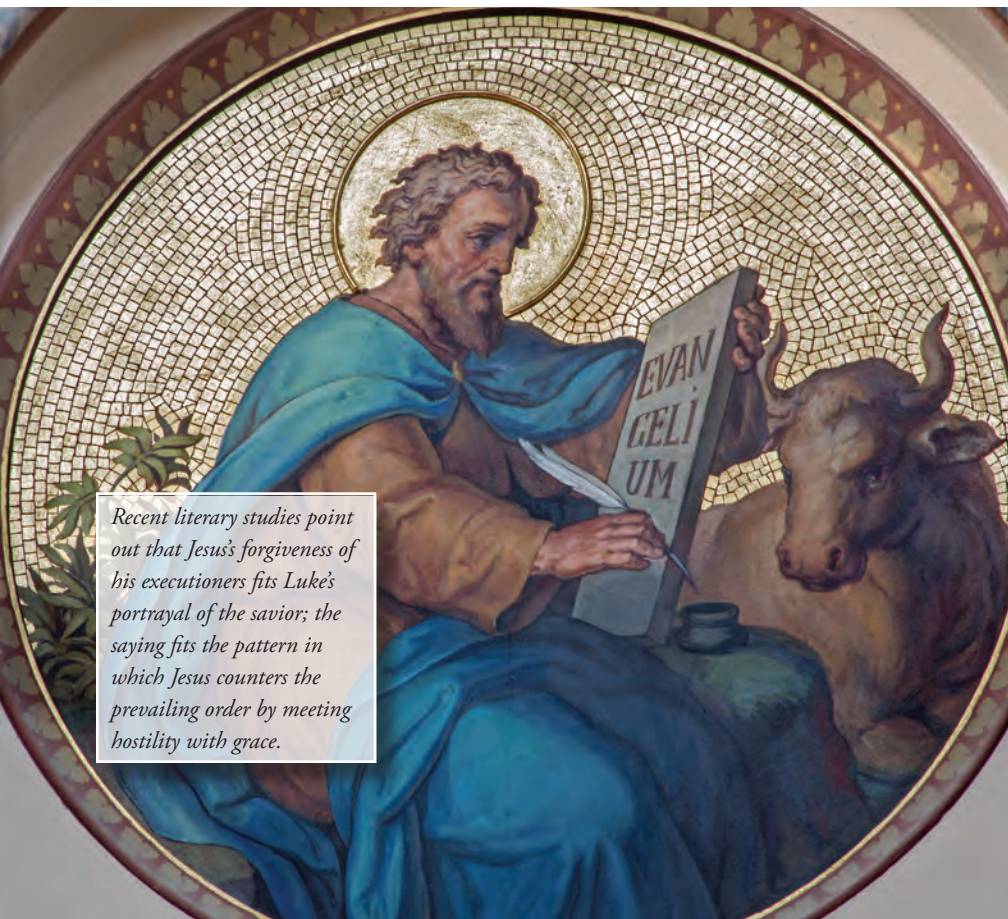
- ◆ The parable of the Prodigal Son appears in Luke 15, which presents another scene of social tension, in which Jesus is preaching to a group of tax collectors and sinners. Also present are the Pharisees and scribes, known for their careful attention to religious practice. When they see Jesus eating with a contemptible group of tax collectors and sinners, they are offended. And in response, Jesus tells a parable.
- ◆ In this story, a man's younger son asks for his inheritance before his father has died. Inexplicably, the father gives the son what he asks for. The boy leaves home and squanders the inheritance. He then decides to return home in hope that his father will hire him as a common laborer. Amazingly, the father runs out to meet the boy and calls for a banquet to celebrate his return.
- ◆ The elder son is highly offended by the gracious treatment given to his brother, but the father insists that graciousness toward the returning rebel does not mean indifference toward the son who stayed at home. What's at stake for the father is the restoration of relationship. And if relationship is what matters, then why would reconciliation evoke resentment instead of celebration?
- ◆ Again, the parable works with different points of view. For those who see themselves as obedient, hard-working citizens, the story exposes resentment and holds it up to critique. But if people see themselves as flawed and disgraced, then the story offers hope for restoration.

JESUS'S DEATH

- ◆ In the final part of the story, Luke struggles with the way Jesus's death fits into the narrative of his life. To some extent, the crucifixion seems inevitable. Ever since the initial sermon at Nazareth, Jesus has challenged those who feel a sense

of privilege; given that approach, it's not surprising that people in authority want to end his career.

- ◆ But Luke also asks whether crucifixion simply means that the old patterns continue. Is the death of Jesus one more instance where the powerful triumph and the innocent suffer? If so, then the theme of God's compassion for the weak may seem like an empty promise. Thus, as the author of Luke recounts the crucifixion, he again brings out the elements of reversal.
- ◆ The main outline of Luke's account is much like that of Mark and Matthew, yet it includes distinctive elements. For example, in Luke, before his execution, Jesus says, "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing."



Recent literary studies point out that Jesus's forgiveness of his executioners fits Luke's portrayal of the savior; the saying fits the pattern in which Jesus counters the prevailing order by meeting hostility with grace.

- ◆ Next, Luke directs attention to the two criminals who are crucified alongside Jesus. One of them ridicules Jesus because he seems powerless. But the other one says, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” And Jesus responds, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”
- Here, Luke again portrays a reversal of judgment. He shows Jesus sharing the same fate as lowly criminals who are condemned for what they have done—death.
- Yet Jesus’s words about paradise counter the finality of that judgment with the prospect of hope. They create a sharp sense of contrast, as Jesus joins others in death while extending hope that they might join him in life.
- The narration tells us that a pall of darkness hangs over the land until Jesus commits his spirit to God and breathes his last. At the end of the chapter, things are unresolved. Death is real, yet Jesus offers hope that it will not be final. There is the promise of life to come, but paradise remains hidden from view, beyond the horizon of the narrative.

JESUS’S RESURRECTION

- ◆ As we come to the final chapter, we find one more instance of reversal, this one involving one of Jesus’s own disciples. In chapter 24, some women visit Jesus’s tomb and are told that he is not dead. The women tell the other disciples but are met with disbelief. Here, Luke introduces a new part of the story, as two of Jesus’s followers leave Jerusalem for the town of Emmaus.
- ◆ As they walk along, Jesus joins them, but they do not recognize him. The two followers report the tragedy of Jesus’s crucifixion to the stranger; the new has brought the hope of the people to nothing. Finally, they tell the stranger that they have heard Jesus is alive, but they apparently make nothing of it.
- ◆ Jesus alters their perspective by telling them that the suffering of the Messiah does not negate hope. Instead, it is the way hope is realized. He tells them to consider the message of the prophets. And we’re reminded that Jesus had read from the prophet Isaiah at the synagogue in Nazareth. Before he brought that message, Jesus had warned that he would meet resistance, as was true for the prophets before him.

- ◆ The crucial point is that the Messiah does not bring hope by avoiding suffering but by moving through it. That is how reversal takes place. To bring good news to the poor and the captives, the Messiah becomes poor and captive through his crucifixion. Then, he rises to life beyond.

SUGGESTED READING

Carroll, “Luke, Gospel of.”

Culpepper, “Luke.”

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Early in the narrative, the Magnificat (the song of Mary) tells of the mighty being brought down and the lowly being lifted up. How is this theme of reversal developed in Luke’s narrative?
2. The parables of the Good Samaritan and Prodigal Son include multiple characters who represent different points of view. How do the contrasting viewpoints shape the readers’ perspectives about the central issue in each story?

JOHN ON THE WORD MADE FLESH

The Gospel of John seems different to readers than the other New Testament gospels. Clement of Alexandria, for example, wrote that the first three gospels provided the “physical things” about Jesus’s life, while John wrote a “spiritual gospel.” John begins with soaring poetic lines that identify Jesus as the divine Word of God. And in the narrative itself, Jesus’s actions are called “signs” because they signify divine truths. Yet John also gives importance to “physical things.” John says the Word of God “became flesh” in Jesus. His actions convey divine reality through things that can be heard, seen, and touched. The point of it all is so that humanity might have life—not simply spiritual life but authentic life.

THE *LOGOS*

- ◆ Unlike the other New Testament gospels, the Gospel of John introduces the story of Jesus in the context of God’s creation of the world. It says, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” John says that in the Word “was life, and the life was the light for human beings. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”
- ◆ The introduction is poetic. The language has a repetitive, almost rhythmic quality, and it engages the imagination through evocative imagery. The most striking aspect is the Greek term *logos*, which is usually translated “word.” In ordinary usage, a *logos* or “word” is a form of communication. It is the way we bring thought into expression.
- ◆ John identifies this power to communicate with the power to create. His gospel says that through the *logos*, God brings all things into being. Many ancient readers would have caught John’s allusion to the opening chapters of Genesis, where God created the heavens and earth by speaking. By echoing the story of God creating by his Word, John alerts readers that the same dynamic is at work in the story of Jesus.

- Indeed, John says that what the *logos* brings is life, and he describes such life as a kind of light for human beings. In a basic sense, life has a physical dimension. It involves heartbeats and breathing. And it was common for ancient writers to identify life with the radiance of light and to equate darkness with death.
 - Yet John also recognizes that true life—authentic life—is more than that. Philosophers of his day insisted that true life emerged as one moved out of the darkness of ignorance into the light of understanding. In this process, a person would turn from the darkness of evil to the light of good.
 - Up to a point, the author of John would agree. But he argues that life must be seen in more theological or relational terms. For him, darkness is not only ignorance but alienation—human alienation from the God who made us. Thus, light not only means coming to know God but being restored in relationship with God. For John, that is where true life is found.
- ◆ That relational aspect informs the pivotal statement in verse 14: “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” The idea is that the Word of God, which creates all things and gives life, now encounters people in embodied form. According to John, Jesus is the embodied Word of God, who conveys the creative will of God by what he says, by what he does, and by who he is. And the goal of God’s Word becoming flesh is restoring human beings to life in relationship with the God who made them.

TURNING WATER INTO WINE

- ◆ In the next section of John, Jesus conveys divine reality to people through actions, called signs. They include miraculous gifts of food and drink, healings, and even the raising of the dead. The author of John was keenly aware that actions are ambiguous and can be construed in different ways. Thus, his challenge was to create a narrative context in which meaning could be discerned.
- ◆ The first sign occurs when Jesus turns water into wine. The disciples go with Jesus to a wedding in the town of Cana in Galilee, where Jesus’s mother is also present. In John’s gospel, we often find that people talk past each other, and that is the case here. When the wedding celebration has been going on for some

time, Jesus's mother comments that the wine has run out. But Jesus replies, "Woman, what have you to do with me? My hour has not yet come."

- ◆ The reference to Jesus's hour is cryptic. We will eventually learn that it refers to the hour or time of his death and resurrection. But here, Jesus's mother focuses on the immediate situation and directs the servants to do whatever Jesus tells them. He, in turn, transforms six stone jars filled with water into wine.
- ◆ What does the gift of wine mean? John says that it reveals Jesus's glory (Greek: *doxa*), possibly connoting the power and presence of God. In this context, a sign is an action that reveals divine power in a manner accessible to the senses. To do so by a lavish gift of wine displays divine favor. For the disciples, the gift confirms their conviction that Jesus is the agent of God.

FEEDING THE MULTITUDES

- ◆ John is keenly aware that actions are ambiguous, and people often interpret actions differently. He helps readers engage the interpretive process by bringing the struggle over meaning into the narrative itself.
- ◆ A good example is the story of Jesus feeding 5,000 people, which appears in all four gospels. What makes John's version unique is the attention to what this action means.
 - For example, the crowd initially interprets the sign in the framework of the Passover tradition. They call Jesus a prophet, a new Moses, who miraculously feeds them, and they want to make this prophet their king. But instead of allowing it, Jesus slips away.
 - The problem here concerns the nature of Jesus's kingship. In the Roman world, an aspiring ruler could attract supporters by giving away free food and providing entertainment; John portrays the crowd this way. After enjoying the free food Jesus provides, they are eager to make him king, with the assumption that free food will keep coming in the future.
 - Thus, later in the chapter, Jesus offers a different interpretation. The crowd follows him to a synagogue in the town of Capernaum, where he says that they have failed to see what the sign actually meant. He tells them they

should work not for what he calls the “food that perishes” but for “food that endures to eternal life.”

- What Jesus is saying is that true life—life that really matters—must have a different quality. The people of Moses’s generation spent their time gathering manna only to die in the desert. But if that’s all life is, what’s the point? Jesus says that when he gave the crowd bread, the sign pointed to God as the ultimate giver, to Jesus himself as the gift, and to life as restored relationship.
- ◆ As you explore this passage, it is helpful to consider that the underlying issue is what life means. The crowd has enough to eat, yet for them, life is essentially a constant struggle to get more of what they already have. Jesus offers a different perspective, which emphasizes the relational aspects of life. He points to the irony that the obsession with bread can actually diminish life by blinding people to the need for relationships that give life.

HEALING THE BLIND MAN

- ◆ Several chapters later, Jesus and his disciples encounter a man who was born blind. The disciples ask who sinned to cause this divine punishment—the man or his parents—but Jesus replies that neither did.
- ◆ In other words, the model of sin and punishment does not work in this case. Jesus simply accepts the blindness as a given. Instead of trying to explain it—which wouldn’t help—he leaves the question about the cause of the blindness unanswered.
- ◆ The way forward in this situation is through healing. Jesus defines his role by saying, “I am the light of the world.” To live out his role as the giver of light, he puts mud on the blind man’s eyes and sends him to wash in a pool. When the man does so, he can see. But that sparks a new series of questions about what the healing means.
- ◆ In the middle of chapter 9, we learn that for the Jewish authorities, the healing is problematic because it is work that takes place on the Sabbath. But the man who was healed takes the view that it was divine action, calling Jesus a prophet.

- ◆ For the author of John, the man who was initially blind regained his sight physically and developed insight about the identity of his healer. At the same time, the authorities, who could always see physically, became increasingly blind to the idea that God might be at work in the healing.

RAISING LAZARUS

- ◆ In chapter 11, Jesus performs the sign that marks the climax of his public career: raising a man from the dead. Jesus receives word that his friend Lazarus is seriously ill from the man's sisters, Mary and Martha. Initially, he does nothing but, after two days, decides to visit Lazarus, leaving the disciples to wonder why he put off the visit. Jesus compounds their confusion when he announces that Lazarus is dead. The disciples can't fathom why Jesus would risk his safety to visit a corpse in a region where he faced mounting opposition to his teaching.



- ◆ In the next scene, Jesus arrives in Bethany, where Lazarus has been in the tomb for four days, but Martha voices the hope that her brother will rise again at the last day, that is, at the end of the age.
- ◆ In a statement typical of John's gospel, Jesus reframes the issue in relational terms. He says, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live. And those who live and believe in me will never die." The idea is that death is real for everyone, but the gospel claims that faith brings people into relationship with God that is true life, and that relationship is not terminated by death. It has a future through the hope of resurrection.
- ◆ Ultimately, Jesus brings Lazarus back to life, but this miracle generates opposition in some quarters. In the eyes of Jesus's detractors, the life-giver is becoming too popular. For Jesus's opponents, a sign that involves the giving of life is not a gift but a threat. And to avoid the possibility of Roman military action, some begin planning to put the life-giver to death.

SUGGESTED READING

Culpepper, *The Gospel and Letters of John*.

Koester, *Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel*.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. The theme of life has multiple dimensions in John's Gospel. What are its main dimensions, and how are they reflected in the episodes considered in the lecture?
2. John shows that people responded to Jesus's miracles or signs in contradictory ways. Why did some see the healing miracles positively? Why did some see them negatively? Why does the writer show us these conflicting points of view?

SELF-GIVING LOVE ACCORDING TO JOHN

In the first half of John, the writer tells us of Jesus's signs, but the meaning of these actions is often unclear. The narrative identifies conflicting points of view and, through the interplay of different perspectives, points to the central idea that Jesus is the giver of life. In this lecture, we'll look at the second half of the gospel, where the challenge of discerning meaning continues. Here, the central question is this: If Jesus is the giver of life, what should we make of his crucifixion? As we read John's final chapters, we will explore how the writer relates the crucifixion to self-giving love, the continuation of relationship, the completion of Jesus's work, and the dynamics of faith.

SELF-GIVING LOVE

- ◆ The first sentence of John 13 tells us that even before the Passover meal, Jesus knew that the hour had come for him to depart from this world. Thus, "having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end." The writer knows that he is about to describe Jesus doing things that can be construed in different ways. To prepare readers to see the meaning of these events differently, John asks them to interpret everything that Jesus does as an expression of love.
- ◆ The main action in the opening scene is remarkably simple: Jesus washing and drying the feet of his disciples. But in terms of ordinary practice, everything about this is disorienting. Jesus interrupts the meal to engage in foot washing, assumes the attire of a slave by putting on a servant's towel, and does the work of a slave by washing his disciples' feet.
- ◆ When Peter asks why their teacher is acting as a slave toward his followers, Jesus responds that what he is doing is essential for their relationship. As readers, we see foot washing as an expression of utter devotion. By taking on the role of a slave, Jesus conveys the extent of his love.

- The fact that Judas, who has already decided to betray Jesus, is still in the room gives the foot washing a more radical quality. The devil has already put betrayal into Judas's heart, yet Jesus responds by washing Judas's feet, which is a gesture of love. The narrative also tells us that Jesus knows which of the disciples will betray him. By washing the feet of Judas, along with those of the other disciples, Jesus transforms love into an act of resistance. It confronts evil and the hatred it represents.
- In John's Gospel, this kind of militant love defines Jesus's course of action, and it will come to full expression in the crucifixion. In John 15:13, Jesus says, "Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for one's friends." Jesus conveys love in a preliminary way by washing the feet of his friends and his betrayer. And he will convey love in a more radical way when he confronts hostility again and lays down his life through the crucifixion.
- ◆ This kind of love also defines the disciples' actions. After washing their feet, Jesus says he has given an example, which he then he puts as a commandment: "Just as I have loved you, you are to love one another." Unlike the earlier commandment to love others as we love ourselves, the disciples are to love others as Jesus loves them. They are to see themselves as recipients of a love that comes from outside themselves and, in turn, to bring that love to expression.

THE CONTINUATION OF RELATIONSHIP

- ◆ In all four gospels, Jesus spends time in conversation with the disciples during the Last Supper. In John, the main issue in this section (John 14–17) is the threat of separation. Jesus tells the disciples that it is time for him to depart. Yet in the face of his impending departure, he speaks about ways in which his relationship with them will continue.
- ◆ Jesus hones in vividly on the issue of separation when he says, "I will not leave you orphaned." On one level, being orphaned depicts the immediate situation of the disciples, who will soon experience the trauma of Jesus's crucifixion. But on another level, it also speaks to the situation of later readers, who lived decades after Jesus's ministry had ended. They were a minority group in a society where most people did not share their beliefs, and they felt marginalized or orphaned.



The vine image addresses the underlying issue of separation; it pictures a community in which people's lives intertwine with those of Jesus and with other people, like the branches on a vine.

- ◆ These chapters speak to that issue in two ways. One is by emphasizing that relationships continue through the work of God's Spirit. A second is through community. In chapter 15, Jesus says, "I am the vine, you are the branches." Throughout the Mediterranean world, hillsides were planted with vines. A vine had a main woody stem, from which branches grew out and became intertwined with each other. And on these interwoven branches, clusters of grapes would form. It's one of the gospel's most vivid images for community.

THE COMPLETION OF JESUS'S WORK

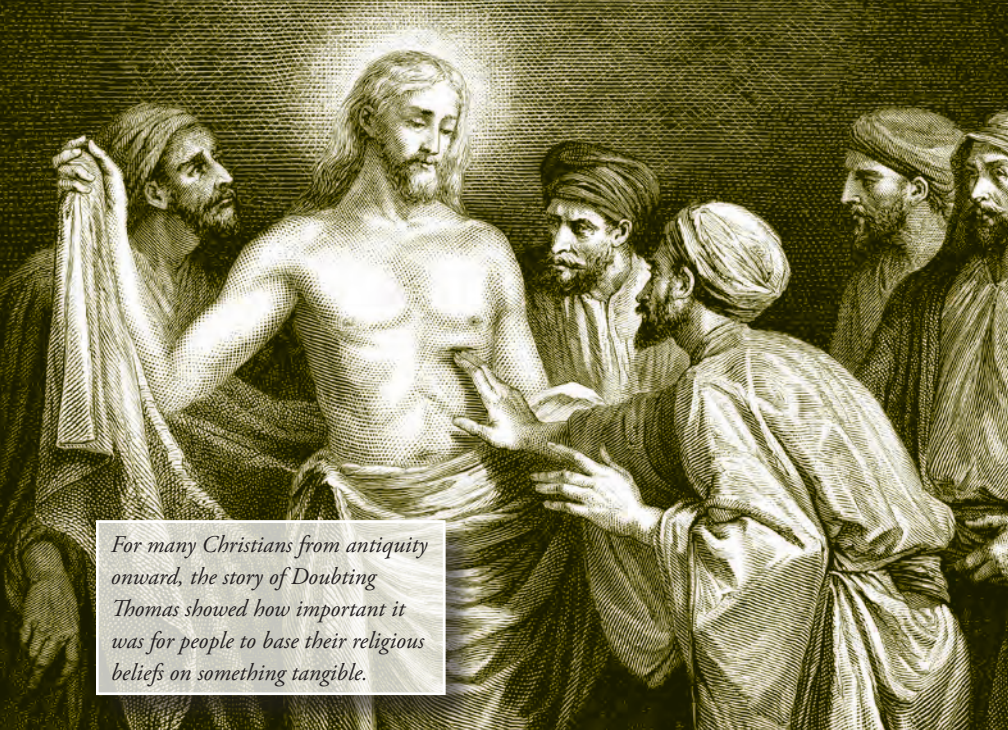
- ◆ Like the other gospels, John recounts Jesus's arrest, the hearings before the authorities, and the crucifixion. We've seen that each gospel must deal with what Jesus's death means. Mark and Matthew show Jesus sharing the depth of human suffering. Luke brings out the aspect of grace in the face of judgment. In John, the meaning relates to the completion of Jesus's work.

- ◆ Making this idea the center of the crucifixion narrative seems counterintuitive. After all, many aspects of the story suggest that death is the tragic interruption of Jesus's work, not its fitting conclusion. The gospel has shown how Jesus's opponents charge that he is a lawbreaker and a blasphemer; from that perspective, Jesus's death is a victory for his opponents because it brings his activity to an end.
- ◆ John's challenge is to show how crucifixion can possibly be seen as the meaningful completion of Jesus's public activity. In doing so, the author depicts scenes that are unique to this gospel, including the appearance of Jesus's mother and an unnamed disciple at the execution.
- ◆ In the gospel itself, the main action is remarkably simple. Jesus says to his mother, "Woman, here is your son." And he says to the disciple, "Here is your mother." From that time on, the disciple takes her into his home. What's striking is that the crucifixion culminates in a scene where relationships are formed. Jesus completes his work by entrusting two people to each other, and as he does so, he forms the nucleus of a community that will continue beyond his death.
 - Scholars note that John builds a kind of symmetry into the narrative. Jesus's mother appears only twice in the gospel: once at the wedding in Cana and once at the crucifixion. At Cana, Jesus did the first of his signs, turning water into wine. And at the cross, Jesus gives people to each other before he drinks sour wine. After he drinks the wine, he speaks his final words, "It is completed," and dies.
 - The symmetry in the narrative invites readers to connect the giving of excellent wine at Cana with the drinking of sour wine at the cross. But that literary connection suggests meaning rather than making it explicit. At Cana, Jesus gives the wine as a sign of divine favor. And the scenes at the cross complete the act of giving, as Jesus gives people to each other and gives up his own life. In John's gospel, that act of self-giving discloses the character of Jesus's work.
- ◆ The final scenes in the crucifixion narrative are equally suggestive. We learn that it is late in the day, and the Jewish authorities don't want Jesus or those crucified with him to remain on the cross until the next day. The two men crucified with Jesus are still alive, but Jesus is already dead. The soldiers pierce his side with a spear and out comes blood and water.

- It's clear that the details here are important, but the writer stops short of explaining what they mean. Instead, he relates each detail to a passage from the Old Testament and lets readers reflect on the implications.
- For example, the writer connects the piercing of Jesus's side with a passage from the book of Zechariah that says, "They will look on him whom they have pierced." What are we supposed to see? One might expect a wound to produce blood, but the gospel adds that water also came out, which is peculiar. And that's apparently the point. For John, the death of Jesus goes beyond the ordinary.
- Elsewhere in the gospel, water is understood to bring life. And life has been a theme since chapter 1. There, the writer identified Jesus as the Word of God, who brings life. Later, he is called the bread of life and the resurrection and the life. If we keep reading, we find him portrayed as the source of living water, which leads to eternal life. Thus, the water flowing from Jesus's side suggests that even in death, he is a source of life.

THE DYNAMICS OF FAITH

- ◆ In the final chapters of John, we again find people struggling to discern the meaning of what they see. The action starts in chapter 20, when Mary Magdalene comes to the tomb in which Jesus's body had been laid and sees that it is open. She assumes that if the tomb has been opened, it's an instance of grave robbery, and she tells two other disciples that the body of Jesus has been taken.
- ◆ When the disciples arrive at the tomb, the question of interpretation continues. They see that the linen cloth that had been wrapped around the body of Jesus is still there, which would make grave robbery unlikely. Then, the disciples simply leave the scene, without saying anything.
- ◆ Mary Magdalene looks into the tomb and sees two angels inside, but that doesn't impress her. She tells them that Jesus's body has been stolen, then turns away without waiting for their response. Next, she sees the risen Jesus standing in front of her, but she believes him to be a gardener and asks for information about the missing body.



For many Christians from antiquity onward, the story of Doubting Thomas showed how important it was for people to base their religious beliefs on something tangible.

- ◆ The turning point finally comes when Jesus addresses her by name. He says, “Mary,” and she recognizes him. The catalyst for recognition is the sense that she is known.
- ◆ John takes its place alongside the other New Testament gospels, all of which explore the significance of Jesus and aspects of human experience. Questions of life and death, conflict and community, suffering and service all have their place in these texts.

SUGGESTED READING

Koester, *The Word of Life*.

Moloney, *Glory Not Dishonor*.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. The concept of love has a central place in John's gospel. How does John's presentation of the foot washing and crucifixion explore different aspects of love?
2. The lecture concluded with the story of Thomas's skepticism and encounter with the risen Jesus. Several different ways of construing that episode were noted. Do you find any of those interpretations helpful? What do you think the significance of the Thomas story might be?

THE EARLY CHURCH IN ACTS

The book of Acts was written by the same person who wrote Luke's Gospel, and it traces the activities of Jesus's followers from around the year 30 to around the year 60 of the 1st century. The book itself was written some decades later, after the events it describes. The writer looks back to that early formative period with the perspective of hindsight. In this lecture, we'll consider the first 11 chapters of Acts, focusing in particular on three topics: the early Christian community's formation, internal and external conflicts that shaped the community's identity, and the community's expansion to include people from various ethnic groups.

FORMATION OF THE COMMUNITY

- ◆ The story of Acts begins after the resurrection, when Jesus is still with the disciples in Jerusalem. In Acts 1:8, he tells them that the Holy Spirit will come upon them and they will be his witnesses “in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” In the chapters to come, the Spirit of God descends, and the disciples gradually move outward to cities across the region.
- ◆ This process begins in chapter 2, as the writer portrays the early church being formed as a renewal movement within Judaism. The focus of this episode is the coming of God's Spirit to the disciples. The setting is the Jewish festival of Pentecost, which signals the beginning of the wheat harvest. Worshipers would travel to Jerusalem to offer the first ripe sheaves of wheat at the temple. Thus, in Jewish tradition, Pentecost is when the harvest begins. In Acts, it's when the new community begins.
- ◆ Jesus's followers have gathered together, and a powerful wind surges through the house where they are sitting. A flame hovers over the head of each one of them. Then, they are filled with the Holy Spirit and begin speaking in other languages.



In the story of the Pentecost in Acts, Jesus's followers experience a miracle of communication: the descent of the Holy Spirit and the empowerment to begin speaking other languages.

- For the writer of Acts, this is a miracle of communication. The Spirit empowers the followers of Jesus to communicate their message in the many different languages of the world.
- Since the conquests of Alexander the Great, the idea had been that to form an empire, a common language was needed for administration and commerce.

But at this gathering in Acts, that pattern is reversed. Here, a community is formed around a common message that's conveyed in multiple languages.

- From this point onward, the community of Jesus's followers will face the challenge of maintaining the integrity of its beliefs while adapting itself to the world's many languages and cultures.
- ◆ In Acts 2, Peter gives a speech that interprets the experience of God's Spirit as the fulfillment of scripture. He quotes from the Old Testament prophet Joel, who envisioned a time when God would pour out his Spirit on all flesh, not just a few inspired individuals. The Spirit would be given to men and women, to old and young, to slaves and free people, and the whole community would prophesy. Peter sees this taking place among the followers of Jesus.
- As people respond favorably to the message, they are baptized. They then form a community in which they share all their resources, giving each member of the group what they need from a common fund.
- It's an attempt to create an ideal community, but as the story continues, we find that the ideal is not sustainable. The writer of Acts must now consider what it means for this community to deal with conflict.

INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL CONFLICT

- ◆ In the second part of Acts, conflict—both within and outside the Christian community—is a major theme. In chapter 6, for example, a conflict emerges within the community. The writer says that the Christian community in Jerusalem includes two groups: the Hebrews and the Hellenists. Both groups are of Jewish background, and both have become followers of Jesus. But they speak different languages and reflect different cultures.
- ◆ The Hebrews are Jewish Christians who speak Hebrew or Aramaic as their primary language. Their outlook is formed by traditional patterns of life in Judea and areas nearby. The Hellenists are also Jewish Christians, but they speak Greek and are more open to Greco-Roman culture.
- ◆ The flashpoint here is not a lofty question about religious truth but a practical matter. The Hellenist speakers complain against the Hebrews, because the widows in their subgroup are missing out on the daily distribution of food.

The issue of resources generates conflict, but conflict generates change. And this is another important theme in Acts. The author recognizes that there was no golden age of peace and harmony but that conflict is a persistent feature of social life. For him, the question is how conflict will be addressed.

- ◆ Ultimately, Peter and some of the other disciples have the Hellenists take on the task of distributing food. They give the job to disciples named Stephen and Philip and to five other men. It's a constructive response to conflict in the community, but the division of labor proves unstable. Stephen is not content to distribute food while the original disciples preach. Interestingly, newer leaders, such as Stephen, become key spokespeople for the Christian message. At this juncture, they move the story forward, while the old guard remains in the background.
- ◆ Stephen's version of the message of Jesus quickly provokes opposition from the wider Jewish community in Jerusalem. They charge that he is denigrating both Jewish law and the temple. Thus, in chapter 7, Stephen recounts the story of Israel, from Abraham up to the time Solomon builds the temple. The theme of the speech is how God accomplishes his purposes despite conflict within Israel. What makes Stephen's speech distinctive is the way he recounts these episodes around the theme of conflict.
- ◆ For Stephen, the pattern of conflict culminates when Jesus is put to death. This is where the speech reaches its rhetorical climax. Stephen's opponents have charged that his message about Jesus somehow denigrates the Law of Moses. But Stephen argues that the narratives in the law recount ongoing opposition to God. And that opposition culminates in the execution of Jesus, which Stephen refers to as murder. The highlight of Stephen's speech is that the true lawbreakers are Jesus's opponents; they are the ones who support the unlawful taking of life.
- ◆ Those listening to Stephen are outraged, and they continue the pattern of rejection by dragging him out of the city and stoning him to death. But like Jesus, before he dies, Stephen asks that God not hold this sin against his murderers.

- ◆ These final words of forgiveness are like a shaft of light in an otherwise dark scene. And they continue the positive side of the pattern set by Stephen's speech. On the negative side, we've seen Stephen portray opposition to Joseph, Moses, and Jesus. Now Stephen's own death continues that negative aspect. But on the positive side, Stephen said that at each juncture, God refused to let opposition close off the future.

EXPANSION OF THE COMMUNITY

- ◆ As Stephen predicted, conflict didn't bring an end to the Christian community but led to its expansion. Acts 8 says that after the death of Stephen, opposition to the followers of Jesus intensified, and many of them left Jerusalem and founded communities elsewhere. In the process of expansion, the community encountered new issues about how to relate to people of different backgrounds.
- ◆ We see aspects of this issue in chapter 8, where Philip, who was one of the Hellenists, goes to Samaria. For centuries, there had been tension between Samaritans and Jews, but when Philip goes to Samaria, he brings the message of Jesus and provides healing to the sick. The narrative says that many Samaritans embrace the message and are baptized. Thus, it is clear that for the followers of Jesus, the older ethnic tensions are not to be a barrier to sharing a common faith.
- ◆ The writer also shows that there were aspects of Samaritan culture that Jesus's early followers resisted, including sorcery or magic. For example, Acts 8 describes a magician in Samaria who offers money in exchange for by the spiritual power of Philip and others in the Christian community. In the narrative, this idea is explicitly rejected. The community clarifies its identity by including people from different ethnic backgrounds, such as Samaritans, but rules out practices that seem incompatible with the faith.
- ◆ The process continues as Philip travels to the south, where he encounters an Ethiopian court official who is also a eunuch. According to Jewish law, no eunuch could be part of the community of Israel, but Philip takes the bold step of baptizing the Ethiopian. Here, we find that such issues as ethnicity and physical condition are overcome through a common faith.

- ◆ In chapter 10, the community expands still further into the non-Jewish world. One of the major figures in this story is a Roman military officer named Cornelius. He reveres the God of Israel, but he is not part of the Jewish community. His counterpart in the story is the apostle Peter, who is a follower of Jesus and keeps Jewish practices. In the Jewish port city of Joppa, Peter confronts what it means for the community to include non-Jews who accept the message of Jesus.
 - According to the book of Acts, both Cornelius and Peter receive visions more or less at the same time, although they have never met each other. Cornelius is directed to send messengers from Caesarea to Joppa to find Peter. Peter in turn has a vision that prepares him to welcome these non-Jewish visitors.
 - Peter sees a sheet being lowered from heaven that contains animals of all sorts, including those considered both clean and unclean in the Jewish tradition. When a voice tells Peter that he can eat from all of them, Peter objects. He says he has never eaten things that are unclean. But then he is told, “What God has made clean, you must not consider impure.” Note that the voice says that God can make clean what has been unclean. God has the power to bring change.
 - Soon, the messengers from Cornelius arrive and invite Peter to Caesarea. When he meets Cornelius, he realizes what his vision means. Peter sees that God shows no partiality. People from every nation who revere God and do what is right are acceptable to God. His task is to extend Jesus’s offer of forgiveness to everyone, while calling them to a common faith. And as Peter says this, there is a repetition of the Christians’ Pentecost experience. Those listening to Peter find themselves moved by the Spirit. And that experience is understood to be a divine affirmation of what Peter has said.

SUGGESTED READING

Garrett, *The Demise of the Devil*.

Gaventa, *The Acts of the Apostles*.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. The book of Acts pictures the Christian community engaging people from different cultural backgrounds. At what points did the community accept differences in a positive way? When did the community critique cultural practices? Why would the community be accepting in some instances and critical in others?
2. Conflict plays an important role in the book of Acts. What negative aspects of conflict emerge in these episodes? What positive responses to conflict occur? How does conflict advance the narrative?

PAUL'S CALLING

The apostle Paul was one of the most controversial figures in early Christianity. In his early life, he was a violent opponent of the Christian community, but later, he became one of its most famous advocates. He was of Jewish background, but he spread the Christian message to non-Jews in the cities of the Roman Empire. In his own time, some saw him as a hero of the faith. Others saw him as a threat to tradition. In this lecture, we'll look at how he is portrayed in the book of Acts, which tells the story of his career; in later lectures, we'll explore Paul's letters.

PAUL'S EARLY LIFE

- ◆ Acts tells us that Paul had a complex relationship to Jewish tradition and Greco-Roman culture. He was probably born around the beginning of the 1st century and, according to Acts, was from the city of Tarsus (in modern Turkey). Culturally, Tarsus was known for education in Greek philosophy and rhetoric, and politically, it was part of the Roman Empire.
- ◆ While growing up at Tarsus, Paul belonged to the Jewish community, and Acts tells us that he had a Hebrew name, Saul. But he also grew up speaking Greek, and he had the Greco-Roman name Paulus or Paul. Acts tells us that he was born a Roman citizen, although that would have been unusual for Jews in Tarsus.
- ◆ Acts also says that Paul's identity was shaped by a move to Jerusalem. There, Paul joined the Pharisees, who were known for their devotion to Jewish law and rigor in matters of purity. Further, Acts tells us that in Jerusalem, Paul spoke Hebrew or, perhaps, Aramaic, which was the local language. He studied with Rabbi Gamaliel, the most famous Jewish teacher of the period.

THE RESHAPING OF PAUL'S IDENTITY

- ◆ Paul is first mentioned in the context of the martyrdom of Stephen, a disciple of Jesus who was stoned earlier in Acts. There, we find that Paul was present at the killing of Stephen and approved of it. Then, the text describes Paul embarking on his own campaign against the church. The writer does not give the reason for Paul's hostility, but the impression is that he saw the message of Jesus as a threat to Jewish beliefs and practices.
- ◆ In chapter 9, Paul is traveling from Jerusalem to Damascus, apparently in some official capacity, in order to arrest Christians there. In this incident, we find a pattern that is similar to what Peter and the Roman officer Cornelius experienced when each had a vision that gave a new direction to his actions. In this story, the two people are Paul and a Christian named Ananias. Again, each of them has a vision, and in the process, each of them is transformed.

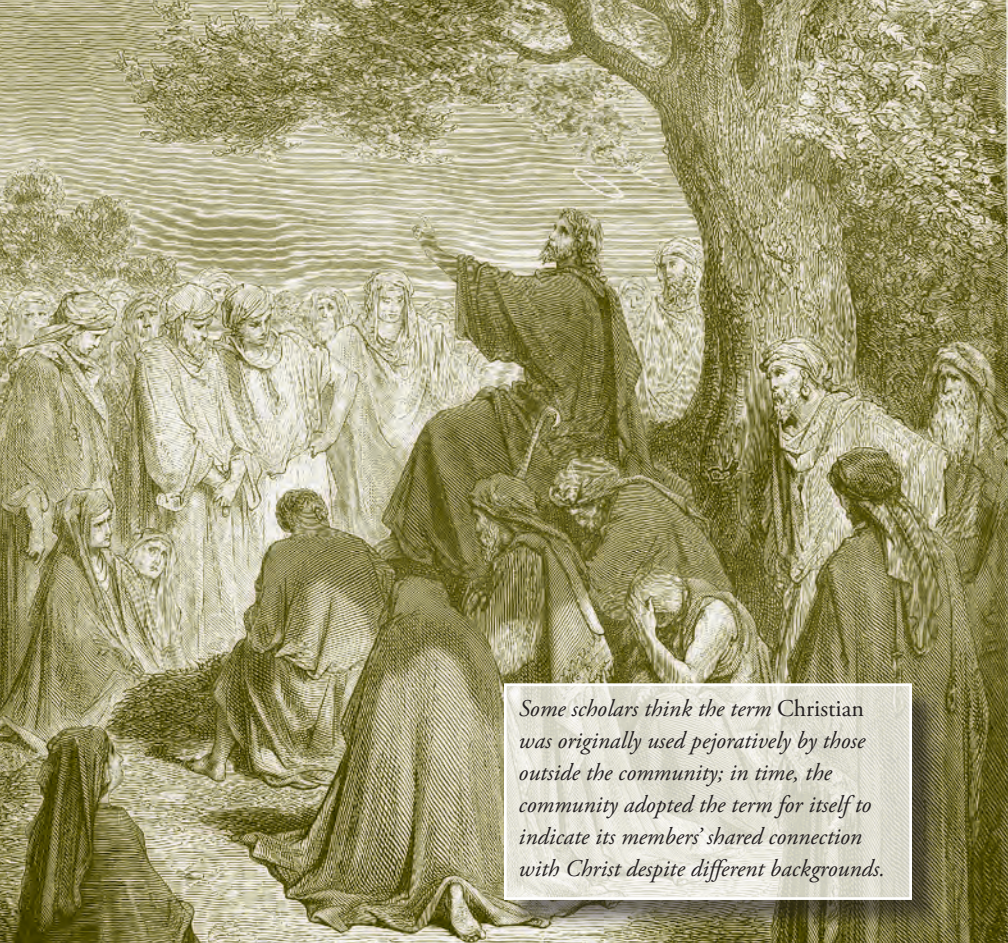


After his conversion on the road to Damascus, Paul is blinded both physically and spiritually—he can't "see" what the experience means; later, he will regain his sight.

- ◆ Paul is virulent in his outrage at Jesus's followers, but on the road to Damascus, a light flashes around him and he falls to the ground. A voice asks, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" Paul replies with a question of his own: "Who are you Lord?" And he is told, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what to do."
- ◆ Paul is blinded by the light. In a physical sense, he can't see at this point, but he also can't see in a deeper sense. He can't see what this experience means. He had planned to arrest Jesus's followers and take them out of the city. But now, Paul's companions must take him into the city, where one of Jesus's followers will meet him and change his life. Eventually, Paul will regain his sight physically, and at a deeper level, he will come to see himself and his calling in a dramatically new way.
- ◆ The scene then shifts to Ananias, a follower of Jesus, who lives in Damascus. Ananias has a vision in which Jesus tells him to go to a certain house and heal Paul. Ananias knows that Paul is determined to arrest Jesus's followers; thus, the prospect of going to help Paul seems unthinkable. Still, Ananias goes to Paul and prays for the healing of his enemy. Paul regains his sight and is baptized into the faith he once rejected.

PAUL'S INTERACTIONS WITH JEWS AND GREEKS

- ◆ The changes taking place in Paul became linked to larger changes taking place in the Christian community itself. We have seen that Paul was the product of different cultures: Jewish, Greek, and Roman. And the first part of Acts indicates that the Christian community itself was beginning to include people from various ethnic backgrounds.
- ◆ The followers of Jesus in Antioch (south-central Turkey) were initially of Jewish background, but in the middle of chapter 11, some of them intentionally reach out to Greeks, including non-Jewish Greeks. And it is Antioch, rather than Jerusalem, that becomes the dynamic center of the effort to spread the Christian faith.
- ◆ After his experience in Damascus, Paul eventually joins the community in Antioch, where it is decided that he should be sent out to extend the faith



Some scholars think the term Christian was originally used pejoratively by those outside the community; in time, the community adopted the term for itself to indicate its members' shared connection with Christ despite different backgrounds.

beyond the local level. Paul and his friend Barnabas first set sail for the island of Cyprus, then go north to what today is Turkey.

- ◆ In the middle of chapter 13, Paul engages Jewish listeners. The setting is a different city named Antioch, this one in the region of Pisidia. There, Paul visits a synagogue and is invited to speak. He delivers a speech that is similar to one by Stephen from earlier in Acts. The theme is God's persistent graciousness despite resistance within Israel.

- The first half of the speech recounts biblical episodes in which God acted for the good of the people. God brought them out of Egypt, led them to the Promised Land, and gave them David as their king. Then Paul adds that God's graciousness continued when he sent Jesus with a message of salvation.
 - At this point, Paul contrasts God's actions with resistance from the people, culminating in the crucifixion of Jesus. Then he returns to the theme of God's persistent graciousness, which led to raising Jesus from the dead. In this speech, the resurrection demonstrates God's refusal to let human opposition close off the future. Where hostility led to Jesus's death, the resurrection shows that God's will is for life. We can see how the speech tries to connect the message about Jesus with the way God was understood in Israel's tradition.
- ◆ In chapter 14, Paul travels to the town of Lystra, where he encounters a man who cannot walk. Paul heals him, much as Jesus heals people in the gospels. In response, bystanders at Lystra equate Paul and Barnabas with Zeus and Hermes, gods who might have been the source of healing in the Greek religious tradition.
- Paul needs to find common ground with these Greek speakers, even as he tries to alter their frame of reference. He refuses to let them think that he and Barnabas are Greek deities, telling them, "We are human beings just like you." That shared humanity is the common ground.
 - Then, Paul shifts the question of healing away from the framework of Greek polytheism and toward the idea that there is one God, the living God, who is the source of life for all nations. As evidence for such a God, Paul invokes the shared experience of rain falling from heaven to make the crops grow for people everywhere. In that new framework, healing can be seen as a gift of God the Creator.
- ◆ The differences between the speeches to a Jewish audience and a Greek audience show the complex process of communicating in an interreligious world. People interpret events in some frame of reference, and the speeches may either affirm or challenge that frame of reference, depending on the perspective they adopt.

PAUL'S INTERACTIONS WITH GENTILES

- ◆ After their journey, Paul and Barnabas return to Antioch and tell the community there about the non-Jews who now believe the message of Jesus. But conflict

breaks out when some Jewish Christians insist that the non-Jewish converts must be circumcised.

- ◆ In around 48 A.D., the church at Antioch sends Paul and Barnabas to discuss this issue with the church in Jerusalem. First, the two sides state their positions. Paul and Barnabas tell about all the non-Jewish people who have received the Christian message. Then, the more conservative Jewish Christians argue that these new converts must be circumcised.
- ◆ At this point, Peter weighs in on Paul's side. He reminds the assembly that early on, he had welcomed Gentiles into the church. Both Jews and non-Jews have the same need for God's grace. And Peter says that people from both groups receive God's grace through trust or faith. Such faith is transformative. It is the way God makes the human heart clean. And if God has already cleansed the hearts of these people by evoking faith, then circumcision is not necessary.
- ◆ Finally, a disciple named James quotes a passage from the book of Amos, which refers to God rebuilding the dwelling of David and bringing in non-Jewish people. James argues that this is what they are now experiencing.

PAUL'S INTERACTIONS WITH ROMANS

- ◆ Next, Paul travels from Jerusalem to Antioch, then west toward Europe. On this journey, he takes along a friend named Silas, and they go to the region of Macedonia in northern Greece. They stop at the city of Philippi, which Acts refers to as a Roman colony. The issue here will be the relationship of Christians to Roman tradition.
- ◆ Things go well for Paul and Silas until they encounter a slave girl who thinks she's helping their cause but isn't. The girl's owners denounce Paul as a Jew who is advocating customs that are foreign to the Roman way of life. Paul and Silas are flogged and put in prison.
- ◆ The plot takes an even more dramatic turn when an earthquake occurs. The doors of the prison are thrown open, and the chains of the prisoners miraculously come undone. The jailer is about to kill himself, because he

assumes the prisoners have escaped and he will be held accountable. But Paul and the others have dutifully remained in prison. The jailer is so impressed that he, too, becomes a believer and is baptized, along with his household.

- ◆ In the morning, the city magistrates agree to let Paul and Silas go free, but now Paul turns the tables on them. He announces that he is a Roman citizen, which means that his punishment without a proper trial was illegal. Here, his Roman citizenship is his point of shared experience with his listeners.

SUGGESTED READING

Parsons, *Acts*.

Westerholm, ed., *The Blackwell Companion to Paul*.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Acts portrays Paul as someone connected to Jewish, Greek, and Roman cultures. How does the narrative show him drawing on each of those aspects of his identity?
2. Acts says that a transformative moment for Paul was his experience of the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus. What changed through that experience? Are there characteristics of Paul that seem to have remained the same?

PAUL AND THE ROMAN EMPIRE

When recounting the life of the apostle Paul, the writer of the New Testament's book of Acts had to consider how Paul and his fellow Christians would be perceived by Roman readers. And what these readers wanted to know was this: Did the beliefs and practices of the group fit the conventional framework of what was acceptable in Roman society, or were they subversive and a threat to the established order? In this lecture, we'll explore three aspects of Paul's character and actions as they are described in Acts: Paul's message about Jesus's kingship in relation to claims about the emperor, the relationship of Paul's message to the other religious traditions in the empire, and Paul's imprisonment and trials.

JESUS'S KINGSHIP

- ◆ We pick up the story of Paul in Acts 17, where he travels from Philippi to the city of Thessalonica, a major port and the headquarters of the Roman governor in the region. The narrative in Acts depicts a pattern in which Paul begins his work in local Jewish communities by going to the synagogue and trying to make the case that Jesus is the Messiah who was promised in the Jewish Scriptures. Acts says that some members of the synagogue came to believe this, as did some Greek men and prominent women.
- ◆ But trouble starts when members of the synagogue become alarmed at the way Paul is attracting people to his message. They enlist the help of ruffians, who vandalize the house where they think Paul and Silas are staying. The ruffians tell the city officials that Paul and Silas are turning the world upside-down by claiming that there is another ruler beside the emperor, a king named Jesus.
- ◆ Note the irony here. The writer pictures the mob accusing Paul and Silas of posing a threat to national security, yet the mob itself is setting the city in an

uproar. The writer wants us to ask: Who really poses a threat to the social order? Is it the disciples, who are simply trying to make a case for their beliefs? Or is it their opponents, who claim to be pro-Roman, but who are disturbing the peace and attacking innocent people?

- ◆ From the writer's perspective, the opponents are clearly the troublemakers. But what makes the issue more complex is that Paul's message does have a subversive aspect. The mob is correct in saying that Paul claims that there is another king named Jesus. That means that Jesus's followers do not give their highest loyalty to the emperor or the Roman state. They have a higher loyalty. Does that threaten the Roman order or not?

1 THESSALONIANS

- ◆ The letter called 1 Thessalonians was composed around 50 A.D. and is Paul's oldest extant letter. It was written to encourage the congregation at Thessalonica after Paul had gone on to Athens and, probably, Corinth.
- ◆ In 1 Thessalonians 1:9, Paul says that the people had turned to God from idols and now served the living and true God. That means that the Thessalonian Christians had formerly worshipped the gods of Greece and Rome. The issues they faced arose after they left that former pattern of worship and accepted the message of Jesus.
- ◆ Paul responds to the Thessalonian situation by affirming many conventional values. In chapter 2, he insists that his own life is characterized by integrity and hard work and that he is not spreading the message of Jesus to enrich himself. In chapter 4, Paul continues in the same vein, urging the Christians of Thessalonica to abide by conventional values, as well. He tells the Thessalonians to show respect for family life and not to engage in sexual immorality, to live quietly and work with their hands, to love others in the community and to behave decently toward outsiders.
- ◆ In chapter 5, we note a more subversive subtext. Here, Paul emphasizes the theme of hope. He envisions a time when those who have died will be raised up to life again. His argument is that the Christian message is centered on Jesus,

who was crucified yet rose from the dead. That means that those who follow Jesus have the hope that they, too, will rise. The subversive element comes in Paul's picture of the event in royal terms.

- ◆ Also in chapter 5, Paul challenges the idea that the world's "peace and security" are permanent. His language seems to allude to Roman claims to have established peace and security on earth that would continue indefinitely. But Paul warns that the current order will end. He even depicts the followers of Jesus as warriors preparing for battle. Yet the battle is not an armed revolt. Instead, Paul says that Jesus's followers wear faith and love as their body armor. They have a helmet of hope. And they refuse to repay evil with evil but seek to do good to everyone.

PAUL'S MESSAGE AND OTHER RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS

- ◆ In the last half of Acts 17, Paul is in Athens, which was a center of Greek culture and philosophy. Among the philosophers who taught there were Stoics and Epicureans.
 - Stoic philosophers used the term *god* for the energy that, in their view, pervaded the universe. The Stoics also referred to this divine energy as *logos*. According to the Stoics, people would follow the divine will by using reason or *logos* (logic) in all situations.
 - In contrast, the Epicureans argued that the gods lived in a blissful state, far removed from the world. The gods did not interfere with human life, and it was up to humanity, through philosophy, to achieve the goal of living well.
- ◆ Acts 17 depicts a scene in which the philosophers engage in debate with Paul, but bystanders are confused by Paul's message. Thus, Paul makes a speech at a place called the Areopagus.
- ◆ The first step is to establish common ground with the listeners. Paul says that he can see that the people of Athens are very religious. Paul takes this impulse to worship as his point of departure, but he directs it toward the God that he understands to be true.

- He makes a case by appealing to the idea that God made all things, which means that people of all nations have a common origin. They owe their existence to God. The implication is that people were created by God for relationship with God. This is the crucial element. Paul argues that this need for relationship is built into the structure of human existence. People search for ways in which that relationship can be fulfilled.
- Paul invokes the many forms of religious expression at Athens as evidence of that basic human search for God. Instead of quoting from the Jewish Scriptures, Paul quotes the Greek poet Aratus, who called human beings God's "offspring." And he concludes that the proper outcome of this human search for God is not to be found in the statues of the gods that humans have created. Instead, it occurs when they come to know the God who created them. And to enable people to know him, Paul says, God revealed his identity and purposes by raising Jesus from the dead.

PAUL'S IMPRISONMENT

- ◆ In the final section of the story, the writer shows people from both Greek and Jewish communities insisting that Paul is a threat to society. The Romans must step in and maintain order so that Paul can be given a fair hearing.
- ◆ We see the challenges posed by the Greek community in Acts 19. Paul is in the city of Ephesus, where the dominant form of worship centered on the goddess Artemis. The craftsmen there who sell religious objects to pilgrims see Paul's teachings as a threat. They realize that people who accept Paul's view of God will no longer come to the temple of Artemis, which will mean a loss of their income. They insist that Paul is a subversive and stage a public protest in the theater, shouting support for Artemis.
- ◆ The town clerk appears as the voice of reason in this episode. He points out that Paul and his companions have not robbed the temple or blasphemed the goddess. If others have a complaint against them, they should follow the due process of law and use the court system. At Ephesus, the main threat to the social order is not Christian teaching but anti-Christian violence. And the writer seeks to show that the adherents of the dominant religious tradition

must ensure that those in the minority are treated fairly under the rule of law.

- ◆ Several chapters later, the charge of subversion is raised again, this time, in a Jewish context. At a meeting with leaders of the Christian community in Jerusalem, Paul is told that rumors are spreading that he is trying to get Jews everywhere to abandon their tradition in favor of joining the Christian community. To counter that impression, these leaders ask Paul to make a public display of obedience to Jewish law. He agrees and goes through a ritual of purification that eventually takes him to the temple. That is where the conflict explodes.
 - Members of the Jewish community assume that Paul has brought non-Jews into the temple, which was forbidden. Opposition against him turns violent, and the Roman forces quickly intervene, seizing Paul. Paul is given a hearing in Jerusalem, then taken to the city of Caesarea for additional hearings; each time, he insists that he is not guilty of the charges made against him.
 - For example, in chapter 24, Paul is brought before the Roman governor. During the hearing, the prosecuting attorney accuses Paul of fomenting social unrest and violating the sanctity of the Jerusalem temple. But Paul denies the charges. He insists that he worships the God of Israel, adheres to the Jewish Scriptures, and believes in the resurrection of the dead—just as many other Jews do.
 - Paul remains in prison in Caesarea for two years. When a new governor arrives, Paul's opponents repeat the charges against him, but Paul demands that his case be brought directly to the emperor—his right as a Roman citizen.
- ◆ In chapter 27, Paul is placed on a ship with a Roman guard. After a shipwreck, he ultimately reaches Rome, where the story ends, leaving Paul under house arrest and waiting for a hearing with the emperor. Later sources say that Paul was beheaded in Rome during the reign of Nero, sometime in the mid-60s of the 1st century.



The stories of Paul's martyrdom inform later artistic portrayals of him holding a sword; the sword not only recalls his death by beheading but also symbolizes the militant power of his message.

SUGGESTED READING

Rowe, *World Upside-Down*.

Skinner, *The Trial Narratives*.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. The book of Acts depicts controversies over how to understand the Christian community's place in the Roman world. Where would the author say that conflict arose because people had misunderstood Paul and his associates? What were the principal causes of misunderstanding?
2. Acts also presents Paul's message as an alternative to other religious options of the period. According to the writer, what made Paul's message distinctive?

PAUL'S LETTERS TO A COMMUNITY IN CONFLICT

In this lecture, we'll focus on two letters of the apostle Paul that appear in the New Testament as 1 and 2 Corinthians. Both were written to the Christians at Corinth in the mid-50s of the 1st century, each dealing with the challenge of creating and maintaining a community. Paul lived in Corinth for about a year and a half and worked as a tentmaker there. Together with his associates Aquila, Priscilla, and Apollos, he later worked in Ephesus, although he continued to stay in touch with the community at Corinth. We'll look at four issues dealt with in the letters: the cross, Spirit, resurrection, and reconciliation.

THE CROSS

- ◆ In the middle of 1 Corinthians 1, Paul says that he has received oral reports about conflict in the congregation. He has heard that various groups there each identify with a particular church leader. To portray the situation, Paul mimics the different groups: "I belong to Paul," "I belong to Apollos," "I belong to Cephas [Peter]," and "I belong to Christ." As Paul portrays it, the Corinthians had turned Christ into someone associated with a particular faction, rather than the unifying center of the congregation.
- ◆ In Paul's eyes, the community's fragmentation reflects misplaced loyalties. He wants the readers to see that Paul, Apollos, and Cephas are the bearers of a message, but none of them can be the focus of the community's identity. He insists that Christ must be the focus, because it is through the message of Christ that God calls them to faith.
- ◆ Paul's argument is that neither he nor the others could bring anyone to faith through their preaching. He reminds the Corinthians that his message was about God bringing salvation through the crucified Jesus. Such an idea might



As we read the letters of Paul, we get insights into his thoughts, the concerns of the people with whom he corresponded, and the society in which they lived.

strike some people as incongruous, even repulsive. But if the Corinthians were persuaded by it, it had nothing to do with Paul's rhetorical powers.

- ◆ Paul assumes that people in the ancient world could see that undergoing crucifixion was the antithesis of power. He presses this idea in 1 Corinthians, when he says that the message of the cross is foolishness. From an ordinary point of view, it was foolish to claim that God's power to save people was revealed through the crucifixion of Jesus.
- Paul says that for Jews, this idea would be scandalous. For example, Deuteronomy says a person hung on the tree (the cross) is under God's curse.
- Paul also says that for Greeks, it would be absurd to see the cross as a channel of divine power. Unlike the temples to Apollo and Aphrodite at Corinth, the cross was an appalling symbol. And that's Paul's point. He as a speaker could not have won the Corinthians' loyalty by bringing a message about crucifixion.

- ◆ For Paul, the cross conveys the extremity of divine love. If love is shown by giving and if the greatest gift one can give is one's life, then the crucifixion shows God in the act of utmost self-giving. Crucifixion does not follow conventional patterns of equating love with beauty or romantic ideals. Conveying love through crucifixion shows a willingness to give up dignity, status, and life itself for the sake of another. That is how crucifixion reveals divine love—by revealing the extent to which God gives himself to restore relationships with humans.
- ◆ By ordinary human standards, the message of the cross was repugnant. It should have turned people away. Thus, the fact that the Corinthians had been drawn to God through it is astonishing. Paul insists that neither he nor Apollos nor Cephas can take credit for the Corinthians' faith. And that means that none of them can have the central place in the community. The unifying center of the congregation must be Christ.

THE SPIRIT

- ◆ Another issue that concerned the Christians at Corinth was “spiritual things.” This issue posed similar questions as it does today: Is spirituality necessarily linked to a religious tradition, or can it be understood as something more private?
- ◆ As in our time, there were some in Corinth who felt that God's Spirit inspired them to speak with ecstatic words or utter prophetic messages. Yet there were still others who did not have these spiritual experiences, and that created tension, because some thought that spiritual experiences gave them a higher status in the community.
- ◆ Paul responds by telling them that they can't discern the presence of God's Spirit simply by looking for emotional intensity. Instead, the principal manifestation of the Spirit's work is faith, and faith is what everyone in the congregation has in common.
 - Paul's assumption is that faith is a relationship of trust. It's a sense of trust in God that comes about through an encounter with God—and that's where the Spirit comes in. We've seen that Paul told the Corinthians about the self-sacrificing love of God being conveyed through the crucified man named Jesus. And he acknowledged that words alone could not make them believe this.

- For there to be genuine trust, God needed to be present through the Spirit, giving people the sense that what was being said was true. For Paul, this is a hallmark of the Spirit. When the message of Jesus rings true for someone, there, the Spirit of God is at work.
- ◆ Beyond that, Paul says, the Spirit might do different things, and different spiritual gifts were supposed to build up the community, not tear it apart. As examples, he says that God's Spirit can empower people to share wisdom and knowledge, to heal and work miracles. For some, it can take the form of ecstatic speech. But he insists that people cannot expect uniformity in these gifts and experiences.
- ◆ To emphasize his point, Paul insists that love is the measure of each person's role. In 1 Corinthians 13, he writes: "If I can prophesy and understand all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing." He goes on to say that love is patient and kind, it is not jealous or boastful, and endures all things.
- ◆ In the face of tension over different spiritual experiences, Paul puts love at the center because he understands that self-sacrificing love characterizes God himself. For Paul, prophesying and speaking in tongues are of value, but they are not of ultimate value. Prophesying and speaking in tongues eventually will end, but love endures because God endures. Love has abiding value. And all the different spiritual gifts the community receives should rightly be used in the service of love.

PAUL ON RESURRECTION

- ◆ At the end of 1 Corinthians, Paul takes up a different question that was disputed at Corinth: the question of death and the nature of hope. Of course, people in every culture have different ways of coming to terms with death, ranging from continued life in an underworld to nothingness.
- ◆ One distinctive idea of death that was favored by some Jewish groups was resurrection—the idea that people remained in the realm of the dead until the end of the present age; then, they would be raised to life again as a group. Some expected resurrection to bring about a restoration of bodily life; others thought

of resurrection as a transformed existence, when those who were raised would shine like stars.

- ◆ In this mix of ideas, the Christians at Corinth debated what they could hope for. And in chapter 15, Paul responds. The lens through which he sees things is the story of Jesus. And for him, the heart of the story is that Jesus died and rose. For Paul, then, if Jesus died and was raised as a whole person, then others who die will also be raised to life as whole people.
- ◆ Paul pictures the present time as one of struggle, in which God's power to give life is battling the forces of death. For Paul, death is not merely the moment at which a person takes a final breath. It's the power that brings people to that final breath. Death is operative in diseases, violence, and hunger. The message of Jesus's resurrection is about God's commitment to continue the battle until death itself is overcome by the sheer power of life.
- ◆ Paul further argues that resurrection of the body means transformation of the body—bringing the person who died into a new mode of existence. His assumption is that God creates the whole person and that God has a future for the whole person. God's goal is not to strip away a portion of a person's existence by destroying the body and saving the soul. Rather, the goal is to transform the whole person, the embodied person, by clothing that person with life.

RECONCILIATION

- ◆ After Paul sent this letter, he made another journey to Corinth to visit the congregation, but someone made some cutting remarks about him, and he ended up leaving with a profound sense of hurt. He was unsure about whether he should visit the congregation again in person. Thus, he wrote the letter called 2 Corinthians to deal with the situation. A major theme here is the renewal of relationship.
- ◆ Paul sets the tone in the opening chapter, where he refers to God giving people *paraklēsis*, that is, comfort, consolation, or encouragement. The idea is that the comfort or encouragement that God gives to Paul and the Corinthians, they can, in turn, give to each other. Those opening lines are a signal that Paul wants to rebuild the damaged relationship.

- ◆ In chapter 2, he refers to the painful visit that had occurred, but he does not want the past to define the future. Paul is grateful that those in Corinth took the situation seriously, confronting the person who made the cutting remarks, but he also knows that more needs to be done to bring healing. Thus, he urges forgiveness. He understands that if what was done in the past determines the future, then there is no future. The damage persists. In the face of that, forgiveness offers the prospect of renewed relationship.
- ◆ In chapter 4, Paul speaks of this message of renewal as the treasure people have received from God. Yet he pictures that treasure being held by human beings, who are like jars made of clay—fragile and breakable.
 - As we read Paul's letters, we are confronted repeatedly with human beings who are as fallible as clay jars. That meant that community could never be created once and for all. There were misplaced loyalties, disputes over spiritual experiences, and questions about the meaning of death itself.
 - For this reason, Paul understood that community must be created and re-created. It is a dynamic, ongoing process. At the end of 2 Corinthians 5, he describes it as the ministry of reconciliation.

SUGGESTED READING

Cousar, *The Letters of Paul*.

Hays, *First Corinthians*.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. According to the lecture, why were “spiritual things” an issue at Corinth? To what extent did Paul challenge the perspectives of his readers? To what extent did he affirm their perspectives? How are perspectives on spiritual things today similar to or different from those reflected in 1 Corinthians?
2. The lecture summarized some of the ancient perspectives on death and the afterlife. How was Paul's perspective similar to and different from other perspectives of his time? How is it similar to and different from the perspectives that people have about death and the afterlife today?

FREEDOM AND THE LAW IN PAUL'S LETTERS

In this lecture, we turn to Paul's letters to the Galatians and the Romans, which are concerned with issues of freedom and law. In Paul's context, the question of freedom had to do with the significance of the message about Jesus. He understood that the message opened up a new relationship with God and brought people into a community that shared a common faith. For Paul, all that was liberating, but it also raised issues that were not easy to resolve, including conflict within Christian communities and how people would direct their lives. A related question was whether that directing would be done by the Jewish law. Paul's letters to the Galatians and Romans address these issues.

THE QUESTION OF FAITH

- ◆ The letter to the Galatians was written for a number of congregations that were founded by Paul in what today is central Turkey. These people were not of Jewish background. Their religious beliefs included elements from the Celtic, Greek, and Roman traditions. But some of them accepted Paul's message and formed Christian communities.
- ◆ After Paul left the area, issues arose when traveling preachers arrived. These visitors were Jewish Christians, who told the Galatians that to fully embrace the Christian faith, they must follow the Law of Moses. The men had to be circumcised, and they were to adopt such practices as eating kosher food and observing Jewish holidays. Against this background, Paul was prompted to write a letter to the Galatians.
- ◆ In Galatians 1, Paul recounts how his worldview was reshaped through his experience of Jesus. His faith now centered on the conviction that through Jesus, God was restoring relationships with people. In chapter 2, he recalls the conference in Jerusalem, where he and other leaders agreed that the message of

Jesus was the central feature of life in the church for both Jews and non-Jews. And they agreed that given the centrality of that message, it was not necessary for non-Jewish Christians to become circumcised. The shared faith was what mattered.

- ◆ In Galatians, Paul mentions an incident that happened afterward, when Peter visited the church at Antioch, which included Christians of Jewish and non-Jewish backgrounds. When it came time to eat, the groups went their separate ways, assuming that those who did not keep kosher could not eat with those who did. For Paul, that was a problem. These people shared a common faith yet were divided by the laws about kosher food. Paul put the question sharply: What defined life in the community? Was it faith in Jesus, or was it Jewish law?
- ◆ At the end of chapter 2, Paul states his position in a provocative way. He says that people are justified by faith in Christ, not by the law. Therefore, they live by faith in Christ, not by the law. For Paul, faith is the definitive element.
- ◆ For Paul, the basic problem in human life is sin. Sin is a relationship that has gone wrong; it is a kind of estrangement or alienation. And Paul assumes that where there is alienation, it will be expressed in actions, which may range from deception and hurtful speech to theft and violence. But all these particular “sins” reflect the underlying problem of alienation from God and other people.
- ◆ If sin is a relationship that has gone wrong, then faith is the relationship set right—that is, justified. Paul can say that people are justified by faith because faith straightens out the relationship that has been warped by mistrust. Paul ascribes this justifying or straightening out to the grace of God.

JEWISH LAW

- ◆ Another question was the status of Jewish law in the Christian community. After all, Paul understood that the God who acted through Jesus was Israel’s God, and Israel’s God was the giver of the law. If the law said that people should be circumcised and keep kosher, why would Paul think that Christians are free to do otherwise?

- ◆ In chapter 3, Paul responds that the answer has to do with two things: people's experience and Scripture.
 - In terms of experience, Paul observes that the Galatians were not of Jewish background. Yet as they heard the message of Jesus, the Spirit of God was at work, drawing them to faith. They did not have to be circumcised in order to start believing the message; thus, Paul can't see why they would need to be circumcised after they believed the message.
 - Then Paul says that living by faith—without circumcision—makes sense in terms of the Scriptures. He recalls that according to the book of Genesis, God made a promise that through Abraham, people from all nations of the earth would be blessed. Those nations included non-Jewish peoples. When the non-Jewish Galatians were blessed by being drawn into faith through the message of Jesus, they received the blessing that was promised to Abraham.
- ◆ Concerning the rest of the Jewish law, Paul said that its role was to protect and restrain. However, the role of the law is limited. At some point, people of



Paul repeatedly refers to passages from the law and the prophetic writings when interpreting the significance of Jesus; he finds a deep congruence between the Torah and the gospel in the importance of showing love to one's neighbor.

faith no longer require the supervision of the law because love itself includes an element of restraint. If you love someone, you restrain your own impulses and do what is needed for the well-being of the other.

FREEDOM

- ◆ Galatians 3:28 is one of the most famous verses in the letter. Here, Paul says that in Christ, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, nor is there male and female.” And now that these dividing lines are gone, everyone is free, as Paul put it, to live as a slave out of love.
- ◆ In Galatians 5:1, Paul writes, “For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand fast, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.” Then, a few verses later, he insists that freedom cannot be self-serving. In verse 13, he says that people are free to become slaves to one another. They are liberated in order to serve.
- ◆ Surprisingly, Paul is advocating a pattern of life that is not based on Jewish law, yet he finds it consistent with Jewish law in its deepest sense. Life in the new community does not follow traditional Jewish patterns, because it does not include being circumcised and keeping kosher. Yet Paul points out that the heart of Jewish law is to love your neighbor as yourself. That is what the message of Jesus moves people to do: It frees them to live out their love in service to others.
- ◆ For the Galatians, this would have been a paradigm shift. In the standard patterns of Greek culture, freedom and slavery were opposite categories. Yet in this letter, Paul brings the categories together.
 - He says that the true signs of slavery are giving in to the forces that destroy community, and the real threat to freedom comes from such things as immorality, jealousy, and anger. Those traits do not express freedom. Instead, they show that people are held captive by their own desires.
 - For Paul, true freedom is expressed in love, joy, peace, patience, and kindness, all of which promote community. That is the fruit of God’s Spirit, which frees people for love and service to others. For Paul, that illustrates what it means to live by faith.

LETTER TO THE ROMANS

- ◆ Paul wrote to the Romans in the mid to late 50s of the 1st century. By that time, there were a number of Christian congregations in the city with members of both Jewish and non-Jewish backgrounds. Paul never visited these congregations, but he wrote a letter conveying his understanding of the faith for this multi-ethnic readership.
- ◆ In Romans 1:16–17, Paul says that the gospel is “the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed.” Paul centers his message on God’s righteousness.
- ◆ Paul focuses on the God of Israel—the God who had freed the people from slavery and sent the prophets. He insists that this same God has now acted to set things right through Jesus, who was Jewish. Then Paul adds that the message is also for people of non-Jewish background. The idea that God seeks to make relationships right with everyone, on the same basis, is the central point of this section.
- ◆ In chapters 1 to 5, Paul argues that God deals with everyone on the same basis because all have the same need. Paul tries to show the degree of commonality among people of various backgrounds. He gives examples of wrongdoing ranging from murder to greed—acts that are not limited to Jews or Greeks but are part of the human condition.
- ◆ Paul says that all acts of wrongdoing reveal the same underlying condition: All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. Paul wants readers to see that imperfection is something they have in common with all other humans. For this reason, God extends salvation to everyone on the same basis. God wants his relationship with all people to be set right. For Paul, the crucifixion of Jesus conveys God’s refusal to let human failings set the terms for relationship. It shows God’s freedom to act in love toward the people estranged from him.

CONFLICT AND RECONCILIATION

- ◆ Paul notes that in his experience, the message of Jesus brought not only reconciliation but conflict, especially conflict within the Jewish community. As he turns to this problem, Paul shifts the issue from the human to the divine

level—from the question of who believes the message and who does not to the question of what God is doing in this conflicted situation. His central conviction is that God refuses to let human resistance define the future. God is free to work in other ways, and as he does so, he will be true to his commitment to bring reconciliation.

- ◆ Paul's experience was that some in the Jewish community rejected the message, but he and others extended the message to outsiders. And Paul understood that when these non-Jews believed the message of Jesus, they came to believe in the God of Israel, because through Jesus, the God of Israel was working to set things right. When non-Jews came to faith in Israel's God, they shared in Israel's tradition.
- ◆ Paul knows that differences remain between those who accept the message of Jesus and those who do not. But he remains convinced that human conflict in the present does not limit God's action for the future. Earlier, Paul insisted that God was at work to reconcile those who were estranged from him. Because that was God's purpose in the past, Paul is convinced it will be God's purpose in the future. If God is true to his own commitments, then conflict and estrangement cannot have the final word.

SUGGESTED READING

Cousar, *Galatians*.

Westerholm, *Perspectives Old and New on Paul*.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. What are some common ways of describing freedom in your own social context? How are those perspectives similar to or different from Paul's understanding of freedom?
2. To what extent do Paul's letters create barriers to good relationships between Jews and Christians? To what extent do they open up possibilities for good relationships?

PAUL ON GENDER ROLES AND SLAVERY

In the last lecture, we noted that Paul's letter to the Galatians included a striking description of the Christian community. Paul said that in Christ, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, nor is there male and female." It's a remarkable idea, but one that also raises questions about what that might mean in practice. In the last lecture, we looked further at what Paul said about Jews and Greeks in his letter to the Romans. In this lecture, we'll consider what he says about slaves and free people and about males and females in four additional letters: Philippians, Philemon, Ephesians, and 1 Timothy.

PHILIPPIANS

- ◆ The book of Acts recounted Paul's arrest in the city of Philippi, where he was accused of undermining Roman tradition. After his release, however, he maintained good relations with the congregation at Philippi. At the time of Philippians, he is a prisoner again, though it is not clear whether he is in Rome or some other city.
- ◆ Paul's opening line in Philippians raises the question of social class. He refers to himself and to his associate Timothy as "slaves" of Jesus. To some extent, it makes sense for Paul to describe himself as a slave. After all, he is in prison and could be executed. In a real sense, then, Paul is like a slave. He no longer has the freedom to lead his own life.
- ◆ In chapter 2, Paul goes on to say that the term *slave* characterizes the Christian community. We also saw this idea in Galatians. There, Paul wrote of the paradox that Jesus brought people freedom, but his followers lived out that freedom in relationship. He said that as free people, they serve others as slaves out of love. In Philippians, he grounds that idea on the way in which Christ renounced his own high status to serve others.

- ◆ Paul uses language that is vivid and graceful, possibly quoting a song or poem. The poem traces an arc in which Christ moves from a high point to a low point and back up again.
 - At the outset—the high point—Christ was in the form of God. In the downward movement, Christ emptied himself and let go of his status. He took on the form of a slave and was born as a human being. The low point occurred when he became obedient to the point of death, giving up his life through crucifixion.
 - Only then does the upward movement take place again, as God elevates Jesus to glory through resurrection.
- ◆ Paul says that his own life had a similar pattern. In chapter 3, he notes that he once had high status as a Pharisee. Then, the downward movement began when Paul became a follower of Jesus. He let go of a sense of identity that was based on heritage and achievement—what he believed gave him status—to live out a relationship that he was convinced had true value. And Paul said that he, too, could move from death into life through resurrection, just as Jesus had done. This perspective enables him to move through the experience of loss in the conviction that it does not define his future.
- ◆ In chapter 3, Paul also gives us a glimpse into gender roles in the church at Philippi. He speaks of two women, Eudoia and Syntyche, who had striven beside him in the work of the gospel. This idea of a close partnership between women and men in Christian communities was typical for Paul.

PHILEMON

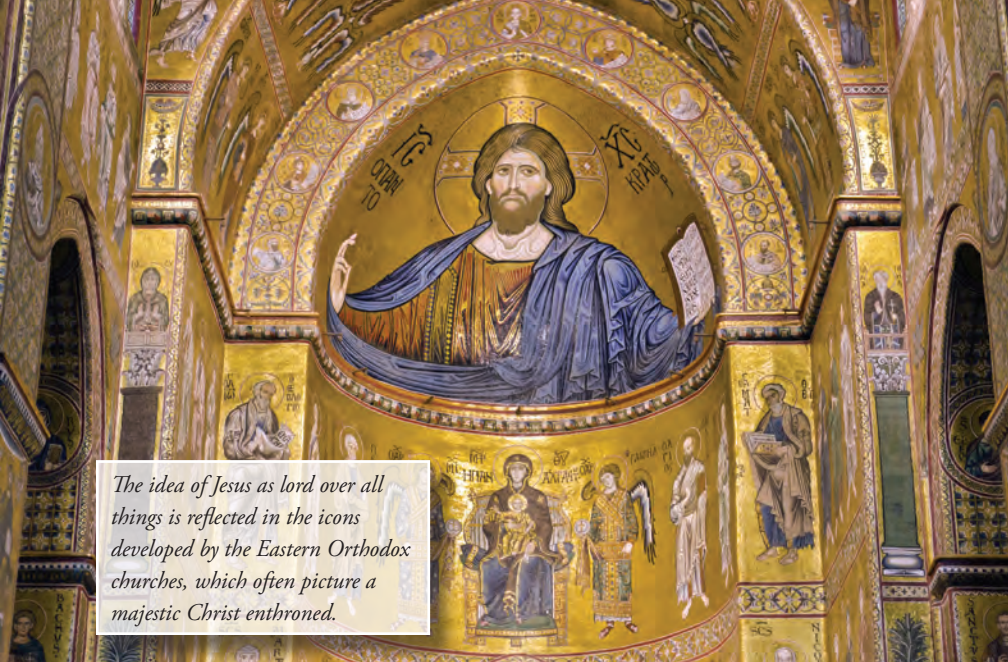
- ◆ Philemon is a letter addressed to a slave owner of that name. Because Paul had apparently introduced Philemon to the Christian faith, there was a significant bond between the two. In prison, Paul met a slave named Onesimus, who belonged to Philemon and had also become a Christian. It's possible that Onesimus had come to Paul for help concerning some problem with his master.
- ◆ The letter reframes the relationship between master and slave in the context of Christian community. Instead of saying that Philemon should set Onesimus free, Paul uses the paradigm of family relationships. Given that both master and

slave are Christians, Paul wants Philemon to receive Onesimus back “no longer as a slave but ... as a beloved brother.” The idea here is that in community, people are not free to be autonomous because freedom takes the form of new relationship. Instead of relating to Onesimus as a slave, Philemon is to relate to him as a brother.

- Family ties were a principal source of identity and belonging in the ancient world. In addition, people were obliged to look out for the interests of others in their families, and they counted on family members for support.
- To underscore the gravity of his message, Paul adds that Philemon is to welcome Onesimus as he would welcome Paul himself. And throughout the letter, Paul says that Philemon is his brother, too. Thus, Philemon should treat Onesimus and Paul in the same way. Paul concludes by saying he is confident that Philemon will do even more than he has asked.

EPHESIANS

- ◆ If the perspective in Philemon is immediate and personal, the outlook in Ephesians is cosmic. It begins with an expansive statement of praise to God, whose grace unfolds throughout the ages. Chapter 1 says that before the world was even created, God developed a plan to bring salvation. And now, in the fullness of time, that plan was carried out through Jesus Christ and the church.
- ◆ A central concept in the letter is God’s desire to bring unity among all things in heaven and on earth in Jesus. In chapter 2, the writer relates the theme of unity to the divisions that had separated Jews and Gentiles. He says that Jews had citizenship in Israel, whereas Gentiles were foreigners or aliens to it. He compares the differences to a stone wall that divided the two groups. But the writer says that the wall of hostility has now been broken down. The Gentiles, who once were foreigners, can become citizens among the people of God.
- ◆ Ephesians considers the relationship of husbands and wives in chapter 5. Ancient writers frequently stressed the importance of harmony within marriage; at the same time, these writers generally assumed that the husband was the head of the household.
 - Ephesians 5:21 reads, “Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ,” making the relationship seem mutual. People are to be subject to



The idea of Jesus as lord over all things is reflected in the icons developed by the Eastern Orthodox churches, which often picture a majestic Christ enthroned.

- one another by serving one another. But then, the letter says that wives are to be subject to their husbands as they are to Christ. The husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church. Picturing the husband as the head certainly alters the sense of mutuality.
- Yet the writer also says that husbands are to love their wives as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her. The trait of a husband is not domination but self-giving. That is the aspect of Christ that husbands are to emulate. They are to love, nourish, and care for their wives as Christ does for the church.
 - ◆ In chapter 6, the writer tells slaves to obey their earthly masters as they obey Christ. Thus, it seems clear that the writer does not challenge slavery as an institution, yet the passage counters certain stereotypes about slaves. Rather than toadies or thieves, Ephesians treats slaves as responsible human beings, whose primary loyalty is to Christ. And the letter tells masters to treat their slaves in the same way.

1 TIMOTHY

- ◆ The style and outlook of 1 Timothy is somewhat different from Paul's earlier letters, and many scholars think it was written one or two generations after Paul. In chapter 1, the writer is concerned about false teachings, which are eroding the fabric of the church. He responds by emphasizing the need for structure and order, which come through church leadership.
- ◆ In chapter 3, the writer focuses on the roles of bishop and deacon. He assumes that leaders of the church should be leaders in their own households and that the head of a household should be stable, sensible, and hospitable.
- ◆ Along with this concern for good order, 1 Timothy includes comments about women that are problematic. In chapter 2, the writer says that women are to learn in silence. They are not to teach or to have authority over men. As a rationale for this thinking, the writer goes back to the book of Genesis, in which Adam was created before Eve.

READING THE BIBLE RESPONSIBLY

- ◆ Such passages seem to conflict with other parts of the Bible, and reading responsibly means taking these conflicts seriously. The letter of 1 Timothy appeals to the creation stories in Genesis as a basis for a hierarchy of men over women, but many people find in Genesis the idea that both men and women were created in the image of God—with no hierarchy.
- ◆ Similar tensions are apparent in other writings we've considered in this lecture. The writer of 1 Timothy insists that women are not to teach, yet in Philipians and Romans, Paul is appreciative of women who were not silent, such as the teacher Priscilla and the apostle Junia. It's clear that women had strong leadership roles among the early Christians.
- ◆ When reading these passages, we have to ask what is central and what is not. For Paul, a central idea is stated in Galatians 3, where he centered Christian identity in faith and baptism. And he said that in Christ, distinctions fade between Jews and Greeks, slaves and free, and males and females. Other passages that speak

of mutual respect, mutual service, and mutual leadership seem consistent with that. But a passage that subjects women to men does not.

- ◆ The same is true for the issue of slavery. There are texts in both the Old and New Testaments that take slavery as a given. They might advocate for humane treatment of slaves, but they do not challenge slavery as an institution. But in the Old Testament, God delivered people out of slavery, and in Galatians, Paul says that in Christ, there is no longer slave or free.
- ◆ As we've seen, in the New Testament, we encounter multiple sides of Paul. In the letters, he speaks with harshness about the scandal of Jesus's crucifixion, then waxes eloquent about the character of Christian love. He was sharply critical of his opponents yet impassioned about the need for reconciliation. Those who work deeply with Paul's writings find themselves outraged and intrigued, affirmed and provoked. It is hard to remain neutral about his work. And that is perhaps why we continue to read it.

SUGGESTED READING

Johnson and Noel. *Onesimus Our Brother*.

Osiek and Macdonald, *A Woman's Place*.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. What perspectives on slavery were expressed in the letters considered in this lecture? At what points did writers adapt common Roman practices? At what points did they redefine common perspectives on slavery?
2. What perspectives on the roles of women and men were reflected in the letters considered in this lecture? How did the lecture deal with the different points of view? What other approaches to dealing with the different view might be helpful?

LETTERS FOR SOJOURNERS

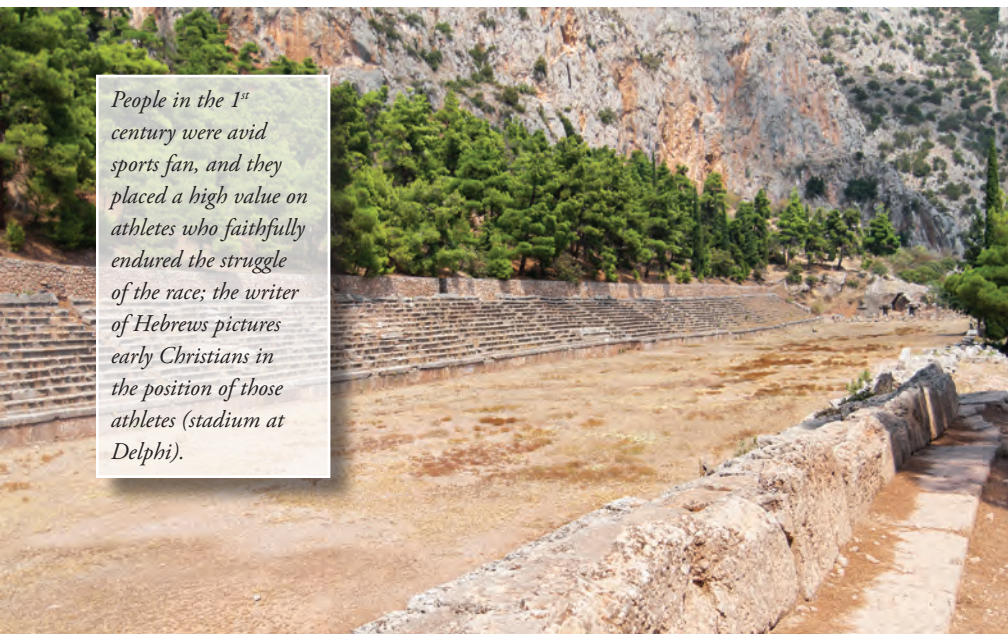


A common thread connects the letters of the New Testament known as Hebrews, James, and 1 Peter: They portray their readers as sojourners or resident aliens. Written not by Paul but by other early Christian writers, these letters address people who have a sense of dislocation—people who live in society but are not fully integrated into it. This social dislocation largely stemmed from religious beliefs that differed from Judaism and from Roman religious practices. The letters we'll consider here speak to that issue in different ways. The letter to the Hebrews calls on early Christians to keep the faith. The letter of James emphasizes integrity, and 1 Peter asks what belonging really means.

LETTER TO THE HEBREWS

- ◆ Somewhat surprisingly, Hebrews lacks the usual features of a letter. Instead of a greeting, for example, it begins, “At many times and in many ways, God spoke in the past to our ancestors through the prophets. But now in these last days God has spoken to us by a Son.” Scholars often refer to Hebrews as a speech because its introduction sounds like a piece of oratory.
- ◆ The writer never tells us his name, but at points in the speech, he tells us something about his readers. In chapter 2, he recalls that initially receiving the Christian message was a spiritual highpoint for these readers. The power of God and the Spirit of God seemed vivid. But after the initial highpoint, they experienced harassment. They were verbally abused and occasionally imprisoned. Yet they rallied and supported one another—at least for a time.
- ◆ Then, the sense of solidarity faded. The early Christians became discouraged, and some began to drift away. They initially found the Christian message to be inspiring, but soon, they felt marginalized in their own society. In their experience, this was not a new age of peace and harmony. It might be better to let go of the faith altogether.

- ◆ In response, the writer uses three sets of images to redefine the way these Christians see their situation. Each set of images helps move them through the discouraging situation of the present toward the future.
 - The first set of images recalls the story of Moses leading the Hebrew people through the desert. The writer tells their story as one that had a beginning point (liberation from slavery) and a goal (the Promised Land). In between was the journey through the desert. The writer of Hebrews wants readers to see themselves in a similar situation. They are in a social wilderness and are in danger of giving up, but the promise of life remains.
 - In the middle of the book, the writer shifts the imagery. He now portrays Jesus as a priest and the letter's readers as people who feel excluded from worship. They seek access to the presence of God, but they feel that way is closed. Christians seem to have no place in the religious culture of the empire. The writer of Hebrews, however, says that readers have a high priest in Jesus, and that transforms the way they see their situation. Like Jewish priests, Jesus makes a sacrifice, but his is a self-sacrifice of the highest order, creating a new bond between God and humans.
 - In the final part of Hebrews, the writer traces a journey from the dawn of creation, through the history of Israel, to the readers' own situation. He highlights moments when people of the past had to keep the faith, even



People in the 1st century were avid sports fan, and they placed a high value on athletes who faithfully endured the struggle of the race; the writer of Hebrews pictures early Christians in the position of those athletes (stadium at Delphi).

when everything they could see called it into question. The author uses athletic imagery to redefine the way the readers see themselves. They feel discouraged, but the author describes a stadium in which they are running, filled with witnesses from the past who kept the faith. The readers are engaged in a contest in which the goal is not speed but perseverance. It's a summons to keep the faith.

LETTER OF JAMES

- ◆ According to tradition, James was the brother of Jesus. He was a leader of the church in Jerusalem and was martyred during the 60s of the 1st century. Today, some interpreters continue to think that James wrote the letter attributed to him, while others think the author's identity is unknown.
- ◆ What's more important for us is the way the author portrays the readers. He addresses Christians, but he refers to them as the 12 tribes of Israel. And he pictures them living in dispersion. This term was used for the people of Israel who lived outside their traditional homeland. Over the generations, some had been refugees of war; other had been exiled or had migrated. Portraying the followers of Jesus as people in dispersion suggests that socially, they felt scattered and out of place.
- ◆ To address these readers, the writer offers advice on how to live, and for James, the central question concerns integrity— defined as the consistency of actions with beliefs. For example, in James 1:22, the author urges, “Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers, who aren't being honest with themselves.” The writer insists that it's not enough simply to have the right ideas. If the ideas matter, then we need to live them out.
- ◆ Further, James connects this broadly held value with a central element in the biblical tradition: to love one's neighbor as oneself. In chapters 1 and 2, James refers to acting in love toward one's neighbor as the perfect law, and he uses it as a criterion for integrity.
- ◆ In chapter 2, James applies that criterion to the issue of social class. The writer pictures a scene in which a group of Christians has gathered, and two people show

up at the door. One is well dressed in fine clothes with fancy jewelry. The other is poor and dirty and wearing shabby clothes. How should the visitors be treated?

- This simple question points to a clash in value systems. Social convention would say that wealth usually warrants privilege. The wealthy person should be invited to take a comfortable seat at the gathering, while the person in rags would stand by the door or sit on the floor.
- But James asks how that common practice fits the fundamental conviction of loving one's neighbor as oneself. He insists that in God's eyes, the poor person has value. The writer goes on to say that there is nothing inherently virtuous about being wealthy.
- James highlights the difference between the two systems of value. On the one hand, social convention assumes that the wealthy are worthy of higher honor than the poor. On the other hand, the command to love one's neighbor eliminates the idea that a person's value can be equated with social class. James challenges readers to put their belief into practice, even when it runs counter to social conventions. Doing so is what integrity requires.

- ◆ At this point, the writer of James takes issue with a certain understanding of Paul's ideas.
 - In the letter to the Galatians, Paul argued that people are set in right relationship with God by faith, not by doing what the law requires. He used the example of Abraham as a person of faith.
 - James assumes that some readers thought Paul's message was that all that counts is having the right beliefs—actions are not important. James makes a sharp critique of that idea, arguing that faith without works is dead. You can have all the right beliefs about God, but if belief does not lead to action, then it is lifeless. James uses Abraham as a clear example of someone who put faith into practice.
- ◆ Both James and Paul insist that faith rightly takes the form of action, and both agree that saying one thing and doing something else shows a lack of integrity. But there is also tension between these writers because their concerns are not exactly the same. To read Paul's emphasis on the relational aspect of faith alongside James's emphasis on the ethical implications helps ensure that we keep both dimensions in mind.



In the 16th century, Martin Luther believed that James lacked substance, while Paul was the superior theologian; others have tried to even out this claim.

1 PETER

- ◆ Scholars disagree over whether 1 Peter was written by the apostle Peter or by someone else in his name. The letter is addressed to Christians in Asia Minor, who had once been members of Greco-Roman society but had joined the Christian community.
- ◆ The opening line of 1 Peter addresses these readers as sojourners or resident aliens. They have sometimes been verbally abused and treated as outsiders in mainstream society. Peter responds with an affirmation of belonging. He says that these resident aliens have been chosen by God, belong to God, and are valued by God. They have also been given new birth into a living hope through the message of Jesus's resurrection. That image of new birth refers to them coming to faith and indicates belonging. It's a way of saying that in faith, they have received a place in the family.
- ◆ Peter goes on to say that they have an inheritance that comes from God. When New Testament scholars read these lines, they sometimes point out that a sense of belonging is a major factor in identity, but the readers of 1 Peter lived in a context where much of the public approval had been withdrawn. They felt pressured to give up their faith. Peter counters by appealing to a higher authority. Given that God's opinion is what matters, Christians have an incentive to hold on to their identity in the face of pressure to relinquish it.
- ◆ Earlier, we saw that the writer of Hebrews identified Jesus as a priest, but 1 Peter refers to the followers of Jesus as priests. On public occasions, priests had the honor of offering prayers, incense, and other sacrifices. In this book, Peter ascribes that same honor to his readers, whose sacrifices are the words of praise they offer to God, as well as their acts of righteous conduct in ordinary life.
- ◆ The writer also knows that belonging to the community has a downside. Some are suffering verbal abuse from their former friends and associates. Others are slaves, whose masters might be harsh. And many women are married to men who do not share their beliefs. In each case, Peter urges them not to respond to abuse with abuse.

- The idea is to show others that instead of adopting the patterns of hatred around them, Christians are to resist and show a higher commitment to doing what is right.
- The author understands that in itself, suffering is not a virtue or an appropriate goal. Instead, the point is to be true to one's convictions despite suffering, because that is what it means to follow in the steps of Christ.

SUGGESTED READING

Elliott, *A Home for the Homeless*.

Koester, *Hebrews*.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Hebrews portrays Jesus as high priest. Why might the readers have found this a meaningful way to understand Jesus's role? At the same time, 1 Peter portrays the members of the Christian community as a holy priesthood. Why might they have found that a meaningful way to understand their role?
2. James emphasizes the need for readers' actions to be consistent with their beliefs. Why was this an important issue for him?

REVELATION'S VISION OF NEW CREATION

Revelation was written in the last part of the 1st century by someone named John, probably not John the apostle. This writer used a familiar literary genre—an apocalypse, which was a kind of narrative with an expansive setting. An apocalypse could take readers from the heights of heaven to the far reaches of earth and even to the gates of the underworld, from the present to the past and into the future. In this lecture, we'll consider four aspects of Revelation: its original audience, the protagonists in the story, the antagonist, and the ways in which the plot moves toward its grand conclusion.

ORIGINAL AUDIENCE OF REVELATION

- ◆ Revelation 1:4 tells us that John is addressing “the seven churches that are in Asia.” These churches are all located in Asia Minor. To make sure we understand the audience, chapters 2 and 3 tell us about the challenges facing these churches, setting the context for understanding the narrative that follows.
- ◆ One issue facing these churches was persecution. A good example is the church at Smyrna. In the 1st century, persecution was local and sporadic.
 - The conflict initially involved some members of a synagogue who apparently saw the Christians as a threat. When the situation escalated, Roman officials got involved. From the Roman point of view, the followers of Jesus were sometimes charged with promoting a kind of superstition.
 - The belief that Jesus was the Messiah and Lord had political overtones and did not fit easily into Greek and Roman religious life. Thus, the officials apparently planned to arrest some members of the Christian community at Smyrna. And if things did not go well, the writer warns that they could be put to death.
- ◆ But persecution was not a problem everywhere. At Pergamum and Thyatira, a different issue was assimilation.

- In this case, there was no immediate threat of violence. Instead, the readers felt a broader social pressure to compromise their beliefs and assimilate into the dominant patterns of society.
- Here, the specific issue was whether to eat food that had been offered to idols as sacrifices. The followers of Jesus wondered whether they should join in sacrificial meals to be sociable, even though they didn't believe in the traditional deities, or whether they should be true to their beliefs and stay away, even though that would seem antisocial. Followers of Christ had to ask how far they could blend into their surroundings before they lost their identity.
- ◆ A third issue was complacency. The clearest example was the church at Laodicea, described at the end of chapter 3. For these believers, the problem was not that they felt threatened but that life was too comfortable. The writer pictures them saying that they are rich and prosperous, without a care in the world. Thus, he gives them a revelation about themselves: that their material wealth is coupled with spiritual poverty. They are affluent in one sense but empty in another. Their wealth has lulled them into a complacency that has no appeal or vitality.

PROTAGONISTS OF REVELATION

- ◆ The protagonists of Revelation are God the Creator and Jesus the Lamb. At the beginning of chapter 4, we are taken from earth into heaven, where John sees the dazzling throne of God.
 - He also sees four mysterious creatures surrounding God: One has a human face and another, the face of a lion. Another looks like an ox, and the last is an eagle. The four creatures are the heavenly representatives of God's creation. They show that the world's many creatures have a place in the presence of God.
 - Finally, there are 24 elders with gold crowns on their heads. The elders are the heavenly representatives of the worshipping community on earth.
 - The scene has clear connections with the Old Testament. And by drawing from earlier prophetic writings, Revelation emphasizes that the God in this scene is Israel's God.
- ◆ The central element in God's identity is that he is the Creator. The heavenly chorus says that God is worthy of glory and honor because he created



Jesus is often associated with a lamb because he exercises the power of God through self-sacrifice; he conquers or overcomes by giving himself for the sake of others.

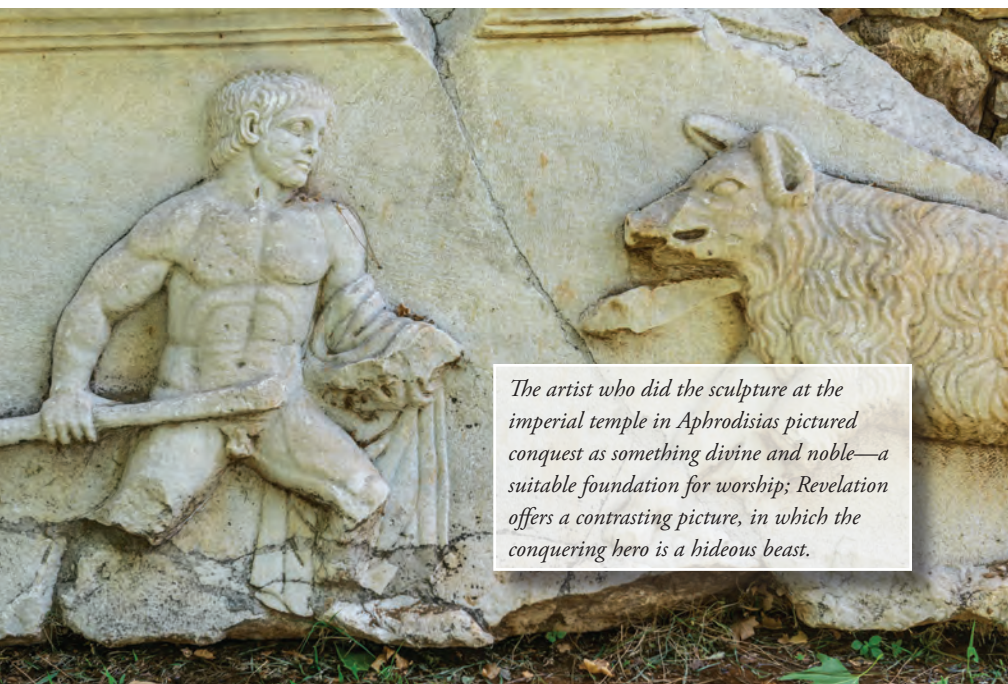
all things. As we said, people often assume that Revelation is all about destruction, but in the narrative, we find God's identity centered in creation. It is God's commitment to the world he created that will inform everything that follows.

- ◆ Chapter 5 focuses on the scroll that God holds in his hand, which seems to contain some expression of the divine will. Who is worthy to open the scroll and make its contents known? Here, we are introduced to the other main protagonist in the story, who is Jesus. But instead of using Jesus's name, the writer brings together the images of the Lion—a warrior, conqueror, and royal figure—and the Lamb—weak, vulnerable, and used in sacrifice.
- ◆ At this point, the themes of power and self-sacrifice are joined with the theme of creation. Revelation depicts the whole created order offering praise to God and the Lamb. The song of praise begins in the center, with the heavenly creatures and the elders. It then moves outward to people of every tribe, language group, and nation. The angels pick up the song and are joined by all the creatures in heaven and on earth, in the sea and underground.

ANTAGONISTS OF REVELATION

- ◆ The main antagonists in Revelation are Satan and the beast. Where God is the Creator, Satan is the destroyer. This contrast is essential for the writer's understanding of evil. He assumes that God created the world to be good. Therefore, evil is like a cancer that has invaded it. To preserve life, the cancer must be destroyed. That is the defining idea here. God is not out to destroy the earth. God is the Creator, who is committed to bringing life. And to do so, God must overcome the evil that has invaded his world to enable life to thrive.
- ◆ Revelation portrays the destructive power of Satan through another image—that of a huge red dragon with 7 heads and 10 horns. In the middle of chapter 12, the writer portrays Satan as a destructive invader. Satan does battle with the angels in heaven, but he is thrown down to earth. Now, this evil infiltrates the political structures of the world to bring destruction. In chapter 13, we meet the beast, who is the chief agent of Satan. Like Satan, the beast has 7 heads and 10 horns, and it rises from the sea to oppress the peoples of the world.

- As you recall from an earlier lecture, the Old Testament book of Daniel pictured four empires as terrifying beasts. There was a lion, a bear, a leopard, and a horned monster. Revelation combines the four beasts into one and portrays the beast as the mirror opposite of the Lamb.
 - Where the Lamb exercises the power of God, the beast exercises the power of Satan. The Lamb endured suffering to redeem people of every tribe and nation. Now, the beast inflicts suffering to oppress people. Most striking is that the Lamb conquers by self-sacrifice, while the beast conquers by warfare and tyranny.
- ◆ This literary contrast between the Lamb and the beast is part of the book's hard-hitting political and religious critique. At the time Revelation was written, it was common for people to treat the Roman emperor as divine, but for the writer of Revelation, this was a blasphemous deification of human authority.
- ◆ One of basic elements in the imperial cult was that the Roman emperors ruled because of their ability to conquer. Revelation is sharply critical of that understanding of power, portraying conquest as repulsive. The conquering hero is actually a hideous beast.



The artist who did the sculpture at the imperial temple in Aphrodisias pictured conquest as something divine and noble—a suitable foundation for worship; Revelation offers a contrasting picture, in which the conquering hero is a hideous beast.

PLOT AND CONCLUSION OF REVELATION

- ◆ For the writer of Revelation, the overall question is: Will people give in to the oppressive power of the beast, or will they resist and follow the redemptive path of the Lamb? To guide their response, the plot of the narrative moves toward scenes in which the Lamb prevails over the beast, and the Creator overcomes the destroyer. The forces of oppression are defeated, and death itself is overcome at the final resurrection. The writer moves through scenes of conflict toward a vivid sense of hope in the final chapters. And in those final scenes, he develops two motifs that we've seen throughout this course: Jerusalem and creation.
- ◆ In chapter 21, John tells of a new heaven and a new earth. And he sees a new Jerusalem come out of heaven from God. Revelation's vision of this new Jerusalem moves beyond the endless cycle of conflict and loss that we've read about, toward hope of another order. It pictures a city in which death is gone, and grief and pain no longer exist. The scale of the city beggars the imagination. It has the radiance of a jewel, its streets are paved with gold, and each gate is made of pearl. The city measures 1,500 miles on each side, and its walls are 1,500 miles high.
- ◆ Of course, no city is like this, and for John, that's the point. He refuses to let readers equate any earthly city with the kingdom of God. He knows that every human society is deeply flawed, and he is unwilling to let any political order claim to be the final one. For John, the purposes of God go beyond those of any human being.
- ◆ The motif of Jerusalem is joined with that of creation in these climactic scenes. At the heart of the city is the river of life, which flows from the throne of God and the Lamb. And there is a tree that is rich with fruit; its leaves are for the healing of the nations. To some extent, the river and the fruit tree resemble what the prophet Ezekiel envisioned, but Revelation goes further. It identifies the tree as the tree of life, calling us back to the beginning of Genesis. Of course, Genesis depicted a primeval paradise that did not last, but Revelation offers the promise of life and healing once again.
- ◆ It is clear that in Revelation, this vision of life is God's gift. The writer has no illusions about the human capacity to bring about heaven on earth. But this

vision of hope for the future can shape life in the present. It identifies God as the Creator, who remains committed to the renewal of creation. And by portraying that as God's goal, it challenges readers to ask how they, too, might contribute to the well-being of the world.

SUGGESTED READING

Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*.

Koester, *Revelation and the End of All Things*.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Many of the common assumptions about Revelation come from popular media. What were your assumptions about Revelation before listening to this lecture? How is the approach taken in the lecture similar to or different from your previous impressions of the book?
2. As you reflect back over the course as a whole, what one or two parts of the Bible were most important for you? What made them especially significant?

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———. *Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel: Meaning, Mystery, Community*. 2nd ed. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003. An overview of how symbolism works in the sayings and actions in John's gospel, including such images as wine, bread, water, and light.

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